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# Naming and changing our world: developing a Freirean-inspired literacy program to discuss gender in a Brazilian landless movement settlement

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Naming and changing our world: Developing a Freirean-inspired literacy program  
to discuss gender in a Brazilian landless movement settlement

by

Claudia Cristina Mendes Giesel

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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2003

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Although scholars throughout the world during the past 30 years or so (Wallerstein, 1983; Faigin, 1985; Shor, 1989; Pennycook, 1990; and others) have been researching and applying what has become known as Critical Pedagogy (CP), not a lot of research has been done on how to approach CP in relation to feminist theory. My research posits that CP could help scholars in the field of feminist theories to develop a liberatory theory to enable women and men to fight against myriad structures of power and oppression. A few feminist scholars (Weiler, 1991; Jackson, 1997; and Vandrick, 1999) have argued that CP can provide feminist theories with new insights, but they have not shown how these insights could help scholars in the development of new theories.

In Brazil, Critical Pedagogy found its grounding in the works and ideas of Paulo Freire, an educator who developed a literacy program to teach poor peasants in the northeast region of the country. Freirean-inspired literacy curricula and programs have been developed throughout the world yet few of these have dealt with how his ideas can be applied to the area of feminist methodology.

My research examined two areas, Freire's Critical Pedagogy and feminist methodology, and studied how these two frameworks could help women to address gender issues in the Brazilian landless movement. In order to look at these areas together, I developed a Freirean-inspired literacy program that could not only improve their literacy skills, but also could expand the dialogues on

gender issues in the settlement and in the movement as well. I used a qualitative methodology framework for my research and adopted the use of narrative inquiry to look into my participants' life experiences.

In the next section, first, I briefly talk about the history of what is currently the largest progressive social movement of all Latin America: the Brazilian Landless Movement (the MST- *Movimento dos Sem Terra*, as the movement is known in the country). And secondly, I discuss the emergence of women's movement in the country.

### **The MST: A History of Struggles**

In Brazil, the struggle for land goes back to the colonization period when the Portuguese arrived in the country in 1500. For years, indigenous people in Brazil have claimed their right to land but unfortunately very few of them had their voices heard (Harnecker, 2003). But between 1950 and 1964, some peasant organizations emerged in the country to pressure the government to do agrarian reform. In the late 1950s, for instance, a peasant organization called *Liga Camponesa* emerged in the country and was rather successful in pressuring the government to do agrarian reform. As Harnecker (2003) states the *Liga Camponesa* was "undoubtedly the most massive and radical movement of the struggle for agrarian reform at that time" (p. 24). Unfortunately, these organizations disappeared after the military coup of 1964 in Brazil.

With the military in power, very few progressive social movements have emerged in the country between the years of 1964 and 1984. But in 1984, when



the military regime was coming to an end, the popular masses began to organize to fight initially for the return of democracy in the country. In the middle of this struggle for democracy, the MST was founded at the end of 1984. The MST inherited a prolonged struggle for land and it primarily emerged to protest against the consequences of the modernization of the Brazilian agriculture, which encouraged mechanized export oriented commercial farming. The major consequence of this modernization was large-scale evictions of small producers and widespread rural unemployment, which greatly affected the lives of many people living in rural areas in Brazil.

The MST also emerged to pressure “the government to legalize their claim to the land and to legitimize their resettled communities” (Stephen, 1997, p. 213). The movement prefers a model of agrarian reform that is not, in any way, radical. Their model is based on family farms, which, of course, implies a big upheaval of the countryside since large estates still hold sway in many areas.

The MST first emerged in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, a state located in the south of Brazil, but now camps and settlements can be found throughout the whole country. The movement is “not merely preoccupied with combating exploitation of labor but with addressing wider problems of marginalized people” (Ghanem, 1998, p. 182). As a consequence of this preoccupation, MST’s participants have created the following goals based on their struggle as landless.

- ❖ Agrarian reform;
- ❖ Seek social justice and equal rights at all levels: economic, political, social, cultural and spiritual;
- ❖ Create conditions necessary for women and men to participate and to be treated equally in society;
- ❖ Eliminate any form of racial, religious, or gender discrimination in society.

The MST, according to Harnecker (2003) has developed different forms of struggle to oppose the landowners' political and economic power and put pressure on the government to distribute land among the farmers (1): occupations, negotiations, camping in squares and public areas in the city, occupation of government building, public meetings, walks and marches, fasts and hunger strikes (p. 71).

For the MST, the occupation of unproductive land has been a powerful form of organization to pressure the government to do agrarian reform since its foundation. Once the land is occupied, they start a process of organizing themselves in the settlements. The word "settlement" appeared in Brazil in the 1960s and it was used by federal government to refer to "an area destined to a group of landless families and a way to solve the problem of the land" (Harnecker, 2003, p. 101). Currently, the word is widely used by the MST to refer to the 1,600 farms they have occupied.

The process of organizing the settlements has to follow certain guidelines that represent the philosophy of the movement. Because the movement believes

in “cooperative work,” a form of organization in which people work and make decisions in groups, the majority of the MST settlements are organized in a system of agro-villages. Usually, in an MST agro-village families work, share the profits, and make decisions collectively.

The formation of agro-villages in the settlements is a way that the MST found to work cooperatively and prove to the government and society that they are serious about contributing to construction of a new society. In addition, working cooperatively after they occupy the land is a way to guarantee that the philosophy of the movement is put into practice.

Since 1984, the MST has represented 250,000 families. The number of rural workers participating in the MST is growing daily due to Brazil’s economic and social situation. The MST’s struggle for land has been recognized at a national and international level. In addition, the movement has contributed to the advancement of democracy in Brazil and the reduction of poverty in rural areas.

In the next section, I historically contextualize women’s movements in Brazil and discuss their importance to the advancement of democracy in Brazil and also to the foundation of the MST.

### **The Emergence of Women’s Movements in Brazil: Women in Movement**

For the past 20 years, progressive social movements of all kinds have been emerging throughout Brazil. They all have different struggles and goals. Women have always participated in these movements, but very few of them were

in leadership positions. Brazilian women had significant influence in the foundation of the Brazilian landless movement as well.

Women's movements emerged in Brazil in the 1930s but at that time most of them were only concerned with raising the standard of living. Brazilian women won the right to vote in 1932, but women's movements started to be noticed in the country after the military coup of 1964. Primarily, these movements had the goal to fight for human rights that had been watered down after the coup.

In 1964, many feminist groups appeared in Brazil's major urban centers. According to Alvarez (1990), "many manifestations of gender-based organizing in fact predate that year." Female domestic workers in São Paulo, for example, began organizing for increased labor benefits for their category, founding the "Domestic Workers' Association" (p. 84).

In the late 1970s, large-scale strikes were seen throughout the whole country (Marquez, 1994) and it was then that Brazilian women started to participate more in politics. According to Marquez, "Brazilian feminists, along with trade unionists, the urban popular movements and the Christian grassroots groups, founded the *Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT)*, Workers' Party" (p. 78) in the late 1970s.

The year of 1982 marked "a critical turning point in Brazilian transition to civilian rule, the most significant shift in the relationship between civil society and the Brazilian political class since the inception of military authoritarianism in 1964" (Alvarez, 1990, p. 137).

From 1982 to the present, Brazilian women have formed trade unions, founded Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), founded feminist parties, and so on (Alvarez, 1994; Anderfuhren, 1994; Teles, 1994; and others). In 1985, for instance, a group of Brazilian women developed a proposal based on women's interests for the new Brazilian constitution. But, of course, women in Brazil, like in any other patriarchal country, have still a long way to go until they become equally treated in society.

In the 1980s, after the creation of the Worker's Party and with the military regime coming to an end, several social movements, including women's movements and the MST, and other organizations emerged in the country. The discussion of women's issues inside the MST started in 1998 and nowadays the movement already has a committee on women that was founded in 1999. Women have greatly contributed to the foundation of the MST and they have occupied leadership positions in the movement since its foundation. But the discussion of gender is a process and is always "in movement." Brazil, unfortunately, is a patriarchal country and although women have participated in the struggle for land with men, few of them are recognized and gender issues are still being discussed at a small scale in the movement.

The emergence of progressive social movements in Brazil has greatly contributed to the advancement of democracy in the country and I believe they have to be historically contextualized in order for us to understand better their struggle. Also, I believe this historical perspective on the MST and the

emergence of women's movements in my country is very significant for my study as well.

In the next section, I talk about the Freirean pedagogy and feminist theories. The Freirean pedagogy and feminist theories form a web of wonders that I found important to address during the development of my study with landless women in the MST.

### **Paulo Freire, Critical Pedagogy, and Feminism: A Web of Wonders**

The works of Freire are known by thousands of educators around the globe, especially the ones working with literacy education and social justice issues. Freire became known around the world by the development of a theoretical methodology that could attend to the needs of the poor and marginalized people of Brazil. The basics of his theoretical methodology were that the attainment of literacy "should be to liberate people so that they can achieve their full potential—their true humanity" (Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000, p. 11).

The Freirean pedagogy to literacy is highly political in that it invites the learners to see themselves as agents of social transformation. Yet, while political, it is also an approach that talks about love, respect, and compassion in everyday life. Freire used critical literacy as the fundamental base of his approach. In this form of literacy a

text is but one way in which we express our literacy. We not only read and write (make sense of and from) the alphabet in connected passages, but

we also read other types of symbols embedded in social practice and institutions and write other types of symbols through our social action to define ourselves and affirm our cultural and social histories. (Shannon, 1990, p. 1)

In the early 1960s, while working with illiterate people in Brazil, Paulo Freire introduced his concept of Critical Pedagogy called *pedagogy of freedom*. Critical Pedagogy can be understood as a “notion of critique that also carries with it a sense of possibility for transformation, and an exploration of the nature of a relationship between culture, knowledge and power” (Pennycook, 1990, p. 307). Chacoff (1989) defines Freire’s ideas as “deeply contextual” (p. 49) because learning to read and write is related to the discussion of themes that are important to the learners. Learners acquire writing and reading skills through a process of inquiry into the nature of real-life problems facing their community.

Freire extensively worked with Critical Pedagogy in many countries around the globe. In the US, Freire greatly influenced the works of scholars like Ira Shor (1989), Henry Giroux (1983) and Nina Wallerstein (1983). In the field of feminist studies, some scholars see the work of Freire as problematic. Feminist pedagogues (Ferganchick-Neufang, 1996 and Luke, 1992) argue that Freire left out of his work issues of gender and race; issues that, according to them, should be included in any work that attempts to work with empowerment and social change.

Ellsworth (1989) has criticized the works of Paulo Freire because she believes he did not address the hierarchical structures of oppression that she and some other scholars believe to be highly significant in the field of liberatory education. According to Ferganchick-Neufang (1996) and Luke (1992), this exclusion of gender issues in Freire's works can perpetuate male dominance. As a consequence of that, Ferganchick-Neufang (1996) and Luke (1992) believe that his pedagogy should be discarded.

On the other hand, Weiler (1991) believes that Freire's pedagogy should be revised to enrich current feminist theories. She researched Freire in feminist theory and argued that Freire's pedagogy should not be *discarded but revised* in terms of hierarchical structures of power and oppression. Feminist pedagogy, according to Weiler, "has raised three areas of concern that are particularly useful in considering the ways in which Freirean and other liberatory pedagogies can be enriched and expanded" (p. 459). These concerns are (a) the role of the teacher; (b) forms of knowledge and truth expressed in personal experiences and feelings; and (c) challenges made by women of color, which "raises the question of difference." Weiler points out that both feminist theory and Freirean pedagogy agree that teachers are also learners although teachers hold "authority by virtue of greater knowledge and experience" (p. 460). The problem with a pedagogy like Freire's, according to her, is that he did not address issues of "power held by teachers depending on their race, gender, and the historical and institutional settings in which they work" (p. 460).



According to Weiler (1991), the teacher's role in feminist pedagogies is much richer in that they critiqued more directly "the contradictions between goals of collectivity and hierarchies of knowledge" (p. 462). Personal experiences, as sources of knowledge and truth, are the primary basis of Freire's works and feminist theory as well. But feminist theory works with women's sharing experiences and how they relate such experiences to the society they live in. The need to understand that women's knowledge is never unified is the primary concern of a feminist theory. By working collectively, women share and compare their lives. In doing so, they are building new forms of knowledge that will have a great impact on "the profoundly social and political nature of who we are" (Weiler, 1991, p. 467). In addition to that, the question of differences, that is, differences brought by women of color, are carefully analyzed in a feminist theory. There are no universal assumptions on the nature of women; so issues on women of color are to be analyzed in order to account for the hierarchical structures of power and oppression. As Weiler argued in her paper, there is "not a universal and common women's essence, but, rather, deep divisions in what different women have experienced, and in the kinds of knowledge they discover when they explain their own experience" (p. 469). Being so, these issues cannot be left out of any pedagogy that names itself "liberatory."

Jackson (1997), in an article discussing Giroux and Freire's pedagogy in feminist theory, also supports Weiler's view. She states that a pedagogy like Freire's can help in the formation of a feminist pedagogy of change. She agrees

that gender issues are a missing piece in Freire's pedagogy but she believes that feminists can add "new levels of insight" (p. 456) in order to make it fit within their contexts. She argues that the notion of empowerment and social change, which is the foundation of CP, fits well in any feminist theory. On the other hand, she argues that the male framework used by Freire is problematic. In his works Freire always made references to the oppression that the peasants (referred to as "men" in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) suffered as being the central issue. According to Jackson, Freire made no reference to the notion that the oppressed can also be the oppressor. She goes on arguing that "oppressed men, for instance, still oppress women; oppressed white women still oppress black women, and so on" (p. 464). Jackson sees the need for issues of race and gender to be included in Freire's pedagogy if one wants to re-invent it in order for it to be applied in any feminist theory.

The levels of insights proposed by Jackson (1997) are linked to the notion that feminist pedagogues should find their own path in education. She points out that feminist theories need to go beyond the idea of challenging the exclusion of women. Jackson believes that for a feminist theory to work towards social change, it needs to "examine oppression of class, race, sexuality, and more" (p. 466). In revising Freire's theory, feminists need "to break down hierarchical structures" (p. 466). She goes on arguing that the humanization of Freire's work can reach men and women. According to her, Paulo Freire's educational

pedagogy has, then, been liberatory for many people and it can be appropriate for feminist theories as well.

Ellsworth (1989) in her article, *Why Doesn't it Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy*, stated that CP can perpetuate relations of domination. She incorporated CP concepts when teaching a class, *Media and Anti-Racist Pedagogies*, in the department of education at University of Wisconsin. She found it to be repressive in that it reproduced relations of domination in the classroom (so-called hierarchical structures of power). The gender (and even racial) gap left out of CP, made the students uncomfortable and unmotivated. The participants were "different" and "these differences meant that each strategy we considered for fighting against racism on campus had to be interrogated for the implication it held for struggles against sexism, ableism, fat oppression, and others" (p. 318). According to her, all forms of oppression are different and not universal. She stated that it is impossible "to relativize oppression by simply claiming we are all oppressed" (p. 323).

The foregoing critique of CP leads me to believe that a feminist re-reading of Freire's philosophy is needed. This re-reading might offer women and men the possibility to understand that there are different levels of oppression that need to be understood if we are to create theories that could de-construct oppressive forms of knowledge. In de-constructing these forms of knowledge, we might be able to see that hierarchical levels of oppression exist and need to be addressed.

My study tried to offer a re-reading of CP and Freire's method and invite women to look at their own lives as sites for transformation which could help them explain gender oppression as well as other forms of oppression. My choice of adopting a qualitative research framework and using women's histories to look into their lives might help my participants engage in dialogue about gender issues and in this process, they might de-constructed their worlds and de-construct pre-formed views that manipulate and keep women oppressed. In de-constructing their worlds, hopefully they will advance the dialogue on gender inside the settlement.

In the next section, I briefly discuss Freire's pedagogy as a methodology and how important it is for the kind of study I developed. I discuss my choice for a feminist methodology in Chapter 2.

### **The Freirean Method: Reading and Transforming the World of the Oppressed**

As Heany (1997) points out, it is important to adopt a form of participatory research where the research process:

challenges the way knowledge is produced with conventional social science methods and disseminated by dominant educational institutions. Through alternate methods, it puts the production of knowledge back into the hands of the people where it can infuse their struggles for social equality, and for the elimination of dependency and its symptoms: poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, etc. (p. 12)

A research process as Heany describes is important in any field in academia. In adult literacy, for instance, it is important because it gives people the opportunity to reflect upon their teaching since “there is no practice without theory, then it is necessary to consider the theoretical underpinnings that inform classroom practice” (Nelson, 1999, p. 373). Pedagogy in this sense “takes place in the intersection of three agencies—the teacher, the learner and the knowledge they produce together” (Lusted, 1986, p. 3).

The most important premise in a research process is to recognize that we are all political beings that are affected by our relationships with others in society. In adult literacy, however, it is necessary to recognize that teaching “is not neutral, nor is it free of the politics of identity” (Ibrahim, 1999, p. 365).

Research studies need to be nurtured by “an action component in its own theorizing process that grows out of practical political grounding” (Brutt-Griffler & Saminy, 1990, p. 419). In doing so, we might be able “to shed the light on the way power relations work with society” (Kumaravadivelu, 1999, p. 466). The changes in society call our attention to look more into different kinds of research processes in which we might be able to relate “personal growth to public life by developing strong skills, academic knowledge, habits of inquiry, and critical curiosity about society, power, inequalities, and change” (Shor, 1992, p. 15).

The works of Paulo Freire, a recognized theorist, educator, and political reformer who developed a theory for education of underrepresented peoples in Brazil, were recognized worldwide for carrying a social change agenda to

teaching and research in the early 1960s. The basics of his pedagogy, as I previously mentioned, were that the attainment of literacy “should be to liberate people so that they can achieve their full potential—their true humanity” (Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000, p. 11).

However, Freire was criticized for the omission of gender issues in his works. But he was able to develop a theory of oppression that enabled hundreds of Brazilians to construct new forms of knowledge throughout the awareness of their worlds. Freire’s method, based on a theory of oppression, invites researchers to look at adult education “as a mode of cultural criticism, useful for questioning the very conditions under which knowledge, values, and social identities are produced, appropriated, and often challenged” (Giroux, 1998, p. 19). Therefore, I believe that the Freirean method can also be significant in helping women reading their worlds and questioning their role in society.

I was greatly influenced by the works of Paulo Freire soon after I started college in Brazil in 1988. I have had the opportunity to read, study, and research issues in adult literacy in Brazil and in the United States and this has influenced me in my choice of theoretical framework for the study I developed with the Brazilian landless women. In developing a literacy program to address inequalities in Brazil, Freire developed a theory of oppression that also helps women to interpret and transform their worlds.

Choosing a theoretical framework for research has to be linked to a practical political grounding (Brutt-Griffler & Saminy, 1990), and I believe that

Freire's pedagogy for being political in nature can help women recognize their oppression and also help them work towards dismantling structures of power in society that were created to keep them oppressed.

By using a research methodology based on Freire's pedagogy, I hoped to invite my participants to reflect on their roles as women and also to reflect on how gender plays an important role in defining us, as women, in society.

### **The Study**

My study examined how women in the Brazilian landless movement used Freire's ideas to develop a literacy program that could help them in their fight against gender oppression in a MST settlement located in the southern part of Brazil. It addressed how a Freirean-inspired program might help women in the Brazilian landless movement use their lives as sites for personal and social change inside the settlement, in the movement, and outside of it. I first looked at how these women viewed gender issues inside the settlement and then described the literacy program we have developed.

In this study, I interviewed four white women ranging from 30 to 45 years old. During the development of this study, I spent five months visiting the settlement. In these five months, I spent five weeks living in the settlement with my participants. During my visits to the settlement, I interviewed and observed my participants as well as reflected on my role as a researcher. In Chapter 3, I introduce my participants and open a chapter where the wonders of a qualitative framework to research helped us understand ourselves better as women and

citizens in the Brazilian society. This understanding highly contributed to the literacy project we developed in the settlement.

### **Methods**

Feminist scholars, critical pedagogues and social activists have recognized the importance of developing theories that can help us understand and dismantle oppressive structures present in our daily lives. The theory of oppression developed by Freire has been successfully used around the world in a variety of areas of study but not a lot has been done in the area of feminism and Critical Pedagogy as I mentioned earlier in this chapter. Freire's method can be very helpful for scholars working with underrepresented groups living in poverty in different contexts throughout the world. Applying Freire's theory along with a qualitative framework, I entered these women's world as a traveler, which according to Lugones (1997) "is part of knowing them and knowing them is part of loving them" (p. 159). I rejected entering their worlds as a tourist, what would certainly have prevented me from engaging in an extensive dialogue with them that could help us as women in our mutual search for liberation in Brazil.

My study relied on techniques of participant-observation; the collection of life stories from my participants about their experiences as women in the landless movement; *note-taking* of all literacy class meetings; and time spent with them in the settlement were my main instruments of data gathering. In addition to that, my own narratives of how participating in this program influenced my life as a feminist played a significant important role in the development of my study. This



will be discussed in Chapter 3 when I introduce my participants. These life stories were gathered through a dialogical process I engaged in with my participants. The dialogical process is a significant part of any Freirean-inspired process and it is of significant help to action research in any field. It can also help researchers with data analysis since it is through dialogue that human beings look at their lives as sites for social change. In addition to this, a dialogical approach is vital to a narrative inquiry to qualitative research.

The use of life stories in qualitative research is an excellent approach to invite participants to look at their own lives as sites for change. I used my participants' life stories as part of my data gathering because I highly valued the dialogical process we engaged in during the study. In order to gather these *life stories* from my participants, I interviewed them three times during the development of the study. I then transcribed and shared my transcriptions with my participants and also invited them to reflect upon their responses. This process of reflexivity was intended to give my participants the opportunity to look at their own lives as sites for change. My interpretations, questions and findings were also shared with each participant for reciprocal meaning, clarification, and discussion, and reflexivity.

Through this study of my participants' life stories, I was able to better understand how my participants were able to reflect on their lives as sites for change at the beginning and at the end of the study. Consequently, my data analysis, itself, is the generation of a story, a narrative. The role of a feminist

framework to carry out research should not only be to invite women to talk about their experiences, but also, to address how it can encourage them to use these experiences to liberate themselves and understand engendered relations of power that emerge in their daily lives. Since human beings are in constant change, my data analysis framework had to adopt an approach where my participants and I were continually reflecting upon our lives. Therefore, I believe that laying down my analyses as the generation of a story throughout the writing process best fit my theoretical framework. In being so, I view as an important piece of my work the discovery of my self in my own country. I saw the need for me to reflect upon my own role as a feminist researcher before I attempted to analyze the lives of my participants because this study also gave me the opportunity to look at my own life as a site for change. Briefly laying down how I perceived myself as a researcher and a woman in the context I was conducting my study will hopefully help my readers to understand better how I analyzed what I perceived and observed during the development of my study. This process of self-reflexivity will be discussed in the next chapter where I discuss the methodology I adopted for this study.

### **Dissertation Overview**

In this study, I looked at how Brazilian landless women used Freire's ideas to develop a literacy program to address gender issues inside the movement. Chapter 1 describes the study as a whole. Chapter 2, which covers the methodology I adopted, is divided in two parts. In the first part, I talk about

feminist methodology and narratives and then discuss how Freire's pedagogy and feminist methodology can come together and make my research study meaningful to the community I worked with. The second part describes the actual research process. In Chapter 3, I carefully discuss my participants' histories and discuss gender issues in the settlement through their eyes. I found it important to have a chapter addressing such an issue because this is one of the central parts of my study. It is in this chapter that my participants come alive and start telling their stories. Stories that are central to my study and to their lives as women in the settlement and in the MST. In Chapter 4, "Where Freire Meets Gender," I explain how the literacy program we developed contributed to the discussion of gender in the settlement and how my participants' views on gender shaped the program. In this chapter, I also describe the literacy classes and how my participants used Freire's ideas to engage in dialogue about gender issues in the settlement. I also discuss materials developed by my participants to address gender in the settlement as well as in the movement as a whole. In Chapter 5, I reflect upon the experience of working with such a group and brainstorm ideas for future work in this field.

The following chapters are the start of a new stage of my life and maybe in the lives of my participants as well. I was very careful to assure that each one of my participants had voice, and I hope I was just in interpreting their worlds. However, I understand that what I perceived and observed are perhaps only true to my eyes. But the dialogue I engaged in with my participants helped me to

understand where they came from and where they want to go and this, hopefully, accounted for a more just interpretation of my findings and therefore a more accurate interpretation of my participants' voices.

## CHAPTER 2: FEMINIST METHODOLOGY

The purpose of using gender as the primary analytic category is to account for and overturn patriarchal domination in order to create social change.

(Bloom, 1998, p. 139)

When I decided to develop this study with women in the Brazilian landless movement I kept in mind that this would also become a journey into my self. This helped me choose the methodological framework most suitable for the kind of study I had in mind. As my research ideas progressed, I noticed that adopting a feminist methodology to my study would guide me through the kind of research I wanted to conduct. I also found it significant to look at the Freirean method and describe how I would integrate feminist methodology and the Freirean pedagogy into my study.

However, first I will discuss my role as a feminist researcher and address how this role has influenced my choice of methodology. Therefore, in the next pages I open this chapter with a reflection upon my self. As Krieger (1991) beautifully states:

At one time I could write a study and then write separately about how, and why, I came to do it. I no longer feel I can proceed in that way. Writing about others, or about a social process, without reference to the self has come to feel alienating and untrue to me. Writing personally has become a way that I can feel I am doing social science in a responsible manner.

(p. 2)

My choice of methodological frameworks intersected with my personal history and my identity. Not addressing these issues would not be consistent with the research study I developed with people in the Brazilian landless movement and nor would it be coherent with my identity as a researcher. For me, a research study to be significant has to help me in my quest for my “self,” my quest to understand what contributed to the construction of my identity and subjectivity. It is only throughout this process that I can use my life as a standpoint to engage in dialogue with my participants; a dialogue about our life histories, a dialogue that can liberate us from our oppressed “selves” and our society.

The dialogue I engage with others about my life, about the person I am and want to be is priceless. It is only through this process that I construct new forms of knowledge. It is in the process of telling my stories that I read my world. It is reading my world that I realize it needs to be changed. Reflecting upon my life empowers me because I use this reflection as a standpoint for personal and societal change.

In the next pages, I discuss a body of literature that helped guide me throughout the development of this study. I first discuss my choice of a feminist methodology and the use of a narrative approach to it. Lastly, I talk about how I see how a feminist methodology and the Freirean pedagogy I adopted can enable me to give back to the community I worked with. In this chapter, I also discuss the research process.

### **Feminist Methodology: Uncovering Gender Oppression**

There is a need for researchers to define what feminist methodology means and how it can help them in the struggle to make their research studies meaningful to their communities. When I think of feminist methodology, I see it providing significant insights to women in their struggle against gender oppression. Feminist methodology is able to uncover relations of power that we, as feminist researchers, face daily. Therefore, in this sense I perceive feminist methodology in *research as praxis*. Adopting a feminist methodology to my study can help my study to be meaningful to my community in that it gives voice to the researched.

Adopting a feminist methodology to research allows us to contribute to women's liberation through producing knowledge that can be used by women themselves. Also, feminist methodology enables us to "acknowledge more honestly than we do, the extent to which our studies are reflections of our inner lives" (Krieger, 1991, p. 1). In acknowledging this, we are able to reflect upon our roles as researchers and therefore make our studies be more transformative and liberatory to our participants and ourselves. The ultimate goal of a feminist methodology is that researchers and researched "become empowered to change our social context and ourselves" (Merriam, 2002, p. 9).

A central characteristic of feminist methodology is that individuals, in reflecting about their worlds, uncover gender oppression and dismantle power structures that cause such a form of oppression to emerge. As it uncovers

oppression, a feminist methodology “keeps the spotlight on power relationships within society so as to expose forces of hegemony and injustice” (Crotty, 1998, p. 157). My choice of adopting a feminist methodology for my study, as Crotty (1998) points out helped me bring:

To focus the possibilities of how culture can sustain irrationality, unfulfilling lifestyles, and social injustice, revealing the degree to which certain ways of life within a culture are strategically organized to preserve the interests of some members of society at the expenses [sic] of others. (p. 132)

In my study with the Brazilian landless movement, I found it significant to use a methodology that could reveal structures of power that as Crotty (1998) elucidates, “preserve the interests of some members of society at the expenses of others” (p. 132). However, adopting a methodology that could use my participants’ stories as a standpoint to enrich my action research and activism was meaningful and important to both me as a researcher and my participants as landless women.

In addition to this, a feminist methodology would enable me as a researcher to see myself as “part of a collective historicocultural memory in the social world” (Darrock & Silvers, 1982). Seeing myself as part of a social world enabled me to enter my participants’ worlds with respect and humility, which constitutes the heart core of a feminist methodology. My choice of entering my participants’ worlds with respect and humility helped me “be accessible in all



stages of the research process” (Henry, 2001, p. 66). Consequently, this helped my research study to be reflexive and dialogic.

Since I was working with an underrepresented group of women in a developing country, I intended my research study to be transformative. The word transformative embodies a political definition of the term in which I see my participants and myself empowering ourselves during the implementation of the research process. Therefore, I wanted my research study to enable us to construct and de-construct forms of knowledge that served to keep us women oppressed.

The use of a feminist methodology in my research study is of great significance because of the social change agenda it carries. By using a feminist methodology, researcher and researched are able to engage in a dialogue where they both have the opportunity to construct reality “based on the constructions of reality” (Mehra, 2001, p. 75).

My decision to embrace a methodology that could allow me to invite my participants to challenge traditional concepts and structures that oppress us as women is interrelated with my desire to articulate my commitments and political priorities as a Third World feminist. However, I had to adopt a theoretical framework that could allow me to pursue my role as a researcher and a citizen of Brazil.

In addition, adopting a feminist methodology also makes it possible for the researcher to return the research “presumably to those communities who made it

possible—as an attempt to deal with the inequality of the typical exchange between researcher and researched” (Patai, 1991, p. 138). Adopting a transformative methodology as such allowed me to make my study meaningful to my participants and their community.

My research design called for a methodology where I could “honor the voices of participants, to create opportunities for reciprocal learning, and most importantly, to empower participants to change the conditions of their lives” (Kirsch, 1999, p. 3). It also had to give me the opportunity “to analyze the research process in response to participants, and to adjust and refine their [my] research goals as they [I] learn more about those they study” (Kirsch, 1999, p. 3). In addition to this, my methodology had to analyze how “social, historical, and cultural factors, shape the research site as well as participants’ goals, values, and experiences” (Kirsch, 1999, p. 5).

Using a feminist methodology for my research enabled us to engage in dialogue and read our worlds. In this reading of the world process, we worked towards bringing up meaningful changes to our selves and our community. In the next section, I discuss how a narrative inquiry can be significant in qualitative research studies that adopt a feminist methodology and how this form of inquiry can provide useful insights to my study.

### **Women Talk: Narratives in Qualitative Research**

A narrative approach to feminist methodology gives researchers “a sense of the issues and experiences around which identities are formed and a sense how these may change over time” (Benmayor, 1991, p. 164). Consequently, the story telling process that engages both researcher and researched might lead them to transform their realities and construct new identities.

In collecting life stories from my participants, I expected to make my research transformative and generate a kind of action research that would enable me to make my research study “return to the community” (Benmayor, 1991). This sense of “return to the community” is significant to any research study that deals with social change and inequalities. Therefore, for me, it is one of the central goals of a feminist framework to research as well.

In enabling my research study to return to the community I was working with not only fit well with feminist methodologies, but it also fit with the Freirean pedagogy I adopted as my theoretical methodology for this study. In this process, my theoretical frameworks enabled me to see that my participants were part of a context, and this context made them see their worlds they way they did. My participants could only change what was true to them and their community.

In a qualitative research study, the use of narratives might help the researcher and the researched to engage in a dialogical approach that might enable both to construct new forms of knowledge; thus, creating a standpoint for

personal and societal change. Therefore, I believe that the use of narratives was highly appropriate for the study I developed with the MST.

Telling stories through a dialogical approach where we acknowledge our differences and respect them makes the researcher and the researched capable of understanding the world “which in turn is based on our knowledge of the self” (Mehra, 2001, p. 74). Story-telling also carries a social-political meaning in which researcher and researched are capable of discovering themselves in the development of the research study.

The use of narratives in a feminist research methodology enables researchers to view feminism “not as an absolute but as a time-bound concept and movement, appearing in many guises and variations” (Patai, 1991, p. 138). And also it helps us understand that “we must raise questions about the ethics of our behavior in relation to those on/with whom we do research” (Patai, 1991, p. 138). A narrative inquiry, in this sense, is transformative and a powerful tool that helped me in my decision to develop a study that could help women and men in the landless movement to liberate themselves and construct a new “self” capable of reading the world with all its engendered relations of power. Also, the use of narratives enabled my participants to advance the discussion about gender issues in the settlement, which consequently might lead them to create the model of society they desire.

Using a narrative inquiry to conduct qualitative research can contribute to social justice and social change since the cycle of action-reflection-action helps

us to understand societal contradictions that keep us away from the essence of what it is to be fully human. In the process of telling our histories we construct our identities and make connections that might help us understand how these identities play a role in society. It is in this sense that I saw this form of inquiry contributing to social change and justice in society and saw it fitting well into my study.

A narrative, as Polkinghorne (1995) stated, is a “linguist form uniquely suited for displaying human existence as situated action” (p. 6). It is very important for me as a researcher and for my participants to display our human existence throughout the dialogical approach we engaged together in during the development of the study.

Adopting a narrative approach can help me to reflect upon my life and understand that “my various life stories and geographies, then, have contributed to conceptual framework, my research questions and approaches” (Henry, 2001, p. 61). Therefore, I believe that a feminist approach to research—besides empowering the researched—has to help the researcher to use her life as a site for social and societal change as well.

Scholars in the field of qualitative research methodologies have adopted the use of narrative inquiry in their research studies (Leslie Bloom & Petra Munro, 1995; Catherine Emihovich, 1995; and Donald Polkinghorne, 1995). Although these scholars entered different worlds while conducting their studies and approached narrative inquiry differently, they all agreed that the use of narrative

inquiry approach opens up a cycle of action-reflection-action that it is only possible through reflexivity and a critical reading of our worlds. The use of narratives not only gives participants the opportunity to examine their worlds but it also gives researchers the opportunity to reflect on how their worlds, their identity, their subjectivity influence their research studies. Bloom (1998) pointed out that:

The importance of focusing on women's lives in their personal narratives is great: they illuminate the course of a life over time and the relationship between individual and society; they demonstrate how women negotiate their exceptional gender status both in their daily lives and over the course of a lifetime (p. 146).

Emihovich (1995), on the other hand, discusses the role of emotion and reason in narrative inquiry and social science. She argues that "the way in which social science writers construct their meaning and then choose a form in which to display it shapes their identity as scholars" (p. 37). She goes on saying that "writing narratives can become a political act since narratives are embedded in a system of social power relations" (p. 42).

The use of narrative inquiry in qualitative methodology is not neutral. It opens doors to researchers and participants to engage in dialogue about their lives and society, and therefore, it is political in nature since this reading of the world questions relations of power present in personal and societal relations. By being a political act, it provides researchers and participants with the opportunity

to engage in a reflexive process that might contribute to the de-construction of biased engendered relations in society.

Using such a form of inquiry invites researchers and participants to enter and challenge human existence. As Polkinghorne (1995) points out a narrative is a “linguist form uniquely suited for displaying human existence as situated action” (p. 6). Narrative inquiry has to provide “a dynamic framework in which the range of disconnected data elements are made to cohere in an interesting explanatory way” (du Preez, 1991, p. 23). The role of researchers adopting a narrative inquiry approach to their studies is not only to produce “a description of action but is writing a history” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 19). It is in the process of writing history that researchers reflect on their lives and how their lives affect their studies. Also, viewing narrative inquiry not simply as description of actions enables researchers and participants to reflect on all the historical, social, economic, political, factors that produce engendered relations of power in the context where the study is carried on.

In the field of feminist research, narrative inquiry provides good insights for feminist researchers because it gives them the chance to use women’s history as ground to criticize the dominant knowledge claims, which have been based primarily in the lives of men in the dominant races, classes, cultures, can decrease the partialities and distortions in the picture of nature of social life provided by the natural and social sciences.

(Sandra Harding, 1991, p. 121)

Using narratives in feminist research opens the way to reflexivity since research projects in this field use their historical contexts as a standpoint and women's lives are part of this historical context.

According to Norman Denzin (1989), "every life is a moral, political, medical, technical, and economic production" (p. 29). Thus human beings' lives are part of their history and constructed in their relations with others in society. A narrative inquiry approach to research enables human beings to reflect on their lives and therefore might lead them to take control of them. Self-stories, according to Denzin (1989), position "the self of the teller centrally in the narrative that is given. It is literally a story of and about the self in relation to an experience" (p. 43). It is in this process of centering the self in the story that narrative inquiry contributes to empowering human beings to read "specific sets of experiences" (Denzin, 1989a, p. 186) that only they, in a historical context, can make sense of.

One of the major aspects of the narrative inquiry is that such an approach privileges "the medium for understanding human experience, an experience that is paradigmatically a temporal and hence historical reality" (Kerby, 1991, p. 4). Therefore a narrative inquiry to research provides both researchers and participants with the opportunity to attain meaning throughout their engagement in the dialogical process.



The dialogical process that emerges from one's life history is political in the sense that it is throughout this process that we explain who we are, as Kerby (1991) states, this process

selects key events which characterize us and organize them according to the formal principles of narratives—to externalize ourselves as if talking of someone else, and for the purpose of self-representation; but also that we learn how to self-narrate from the outside, from other stories, and particularly through the process of identification with other characters.

(p. 17)

Learning to “self-narrate from the outside” leads to a political reading of the world that might lead to consciousness awareness and thus personal and societal change. Human beings' life histories are

ceaselessly intertwined with narratives, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semi-conscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue. (Brooks, 1984, p. 3)

Undoubtedly, our life histories are filled with ideology therefore a study using narratives to look at women's histories is a study that is concerned with the inquiry of “the modes of production of social representation” (Singer, 1993, p. 19). It is in telling our stories that “we become fully aware, fully conscious of our own lives through the process of putting them together in story form” (Atkinson, 1998,

p. 7); therefore, a narrative inquiry can help us, researchers and participants, to make sense of the world and reflect upon “modes of production” of knowledge, identity and subjectivity.

Using narratives in qualitative research studies gives researchers and participants the opportunity to be involved in the discovery of “self and social position” (Bloom, 1998). The quest for our “selves” and our social position is needed to understand and dismantle oppressive structures in our lives and in society.

I will now turn my discussion to the importance of using a narrative inquiry in social movements since this is the world I entered while conducting this research. This is the world I entered searching for my social position and myself. In this process, the dialogue I engaged with my participants invited my participants to embrace this search by themselves as well.

### **Narratives in Social Movements: Research in Action**

As Currie (1998) beautifully states, “when I tell my story, I must deny I am inventing myself in the process in order to believe I am discovering myself” (p. 131). The process of telling a story makes us discover ourselves. It is throughout this process of discovery that we come to an understanding about who we are and what kinds of relations of power make us invent ourselves. Human beings should not be products of inventions but products of discovery. A narrative inquiry can help us (re)discover ourselves throughout our quest into the nature of our personal, social, cultural, religious, and political experiences.

I will focus my discussion here on the use of narratives in social movement research. There are myriad ways to define progressive social movements, and I will use one that better relates to the kind of movement I was involved with in Brazil while conducting my study, the Brazilian landless movement. The Brazilian landless movement has as its goal to mobilize “all possible segments in favor of the country’s development” (Ghanem, 1998, p. 179). The Brazilian landless movement is not “merely preoccupied with combating exploitation of labor but with addressing wider problems of marginalized peoples” (Ghanem, 1998, p. 182).

In my work with the Brazilian landless, my goal was to use narrative inquiry to empower my participants to look at their lives as sites for social and personal change as well as sites for the advancement of the movement itself. My intention in adopting a narrative inquiry to my research study with the Brazilian landless was help my participants to challenge societal contradictions that make social movements emerge in the first place.

Scholars in the field of social sciences have addressed the use of a narrative inquiry to social movements (King, 1997; Polletta, 1998; and Taylor, 1998). Kling (1995), for instance, believes that using narratives in social movements connects “analysis to the ways in which people directly engage and construct everyday experience” (p. 5). Using a narrative inquiry to social movement is then highly beneficial to look at how new forms of knowledge are

produced from the interactions of people participating in social movements. Kling goes on to say that a narrative inquiry to qualitative research

is a way of tying the abstraction and generality of formalized movement theory to the personal biographies of those who enact the movements. To seek the stories people are telling and listening to is to seek how they compose their lives. (p. 5)

Polletta (1998,) in an article where she discusses the uses of narratives in social movements, points out that such an inquiry might help participants “to turn the anomalous into the new” (p. 422). In doing this, Polletta believes that story telling might help participants “to create political opportunities for protest” (p. 422). It is in the story-telling process that “our becoming, as an individual, a nation, a people, we establish who we are” (p. 422).

Taylor (1998), in a study done with women in the postpartum depression self-help movement, points out that a narrative inquiry helped women to use “postpartum illness as a site for challenging the ideology of intensive mothering that requires women to dedicate themselves to childrearing” (p. 375). Taylor’s study pointed out that narratives could help participants discover their “selves” and their social positions, what is the core of a narrative inquiry.

A narrative inquiry into qualitative research enables participants and researchers to come to an understanding that we are all in our current socioeconomic position as a result of stratification by class, race, gender, and culture, and the role expectations that go with them. As Roth (2001) states social

movements “are something that people create to press for social change. They are spaces that are made by people to allow relationships between them that can challenge power” (p. 1). The struggle to challenge power cannot move forward without an understanding how relations of power were created in the first place. Using a narrative inquiry framework to research might enable social movement participants to engage in consciousness raising and consequently dismantle relations of power before challenging them.

As Davis (2002) explains, the process of interpreting and “narratizing” personal experiences—“biographical work”—is artful, to be sure, but it is also constrained by the repertoire of stories available and sanctioned in one’s context of action (p. 19). Accounts of experiences are not merely individual constructions; they emerge in dialogue with others and thus the importance of a narrative inquiry to research where participants and research can engage in a dialogue about these constructions.

A narrative inquiry “is central to social movements because it constructs agency, shapes identity, and motivates action” (Ganz, 2001, p. 2). It is thought narratization, as Ganz (2001) explains, that

our individual identities are thus linked with those with whom we share stories—our families, communities, colleagues, faith traditions, nationalities—and with whom we enact them at our family dinners, worship services, holidays, and other cultural celebrations that institutionalize—or transform—their retelling. (p. 2)

The use of narrative in social movements is of great importance since it is by engaging in a dialogue about their lives that social movement participants shape their identities, read their world, and challenge relations of power. This process not only benefits the lives of the participants that but also contributes to the advancement of the movement itself.

It is in the story telling process that individuals participating in social movements construct their communities. As Ganz (2001) elucidates “our stories articulate strongly held beliefs about what we value, what we fear, what inspires us, and what alienates us. They enact how we ‘feel’ about the world, not just how we ‘think’ about it” (p. 4).

Story telling is a process of action because it is in this process that participants attain meaning and produce new forms of knowledge throughout their reading of the world. In being so, a narrative inquiry to social movement research is political in nature since it gives participants the opportunity to fill in the gap between the personal and the political.

In a study about the history of Moroccan women, Baker (1998) states “we all use narratives to construct our senses of ourselves. We find identity and meaning by telling stories about what we have done in our lives, and our actions in history” (p. 5). In doing so, Moroccan women in Baker’s study were able “to construct a life history that center on their experience of resistance” (p. 6). Consequently, a narrative inquiry is of great significance to participants in social movements in their quest for liberation at all levels. It is in the telling of their

histories that human beings de-construct false identities and move towards a more critical view of the world their movements are committed to challenge and change.

In challenging the world, researchers and participants have to bear in mind that “as one story ends, another begins, but then the earlier story overlaps with the one that is now being told. Stories become arbitrary constructions within the larger narratives that contain the story the teller is attempting to tell” (Denzin, 1989, p. 73). Applying this to social movement research, there is a need for researchers in this field to acknowledge that “no self or personal-experience story is ever an individual production. It derives from larger group, cultural, ideological, and historical contexts” (Denzin, 1989, p. 73). And it is under this premise that I see a narrative inquiry to social movements empowering participants and researchers to move towards a more collective telling of their experiences. And it is under this premise that I carried out my study in my quest for liberation and a dialogue that can contribute to the transformation of others.

In the next section, I address how feminist methodology and the Freirean pedagogy can come together and provide good insights to researchers who desire to make their studies meaningful to their communities.

### **Feminist Methodology and Freire’s Method:**

#### **Giving Back to the Community**

Freire believed that the learning process is only meaningful when the learners acknowledge “the relationship between language and thought and the

relationship it has to his or her own transformation" (Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000, p. 12). For me, feminist methodology and the Freirean method can help researched and researcher view themselves" as historical humans in a people-created sociocultural context, that is, one which they have the power and possibility to transform to their liking" (Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000, p. 13). Therefore, I believe that intersecting a feminist methodology with the theory of oppression that Freire developed can be of great significant to my research project with landless women since I see my experiences and my participants' experiences as being historically constructed.

In order for the oppressed to transform their reality, it is necessary that they acknowledge their oppression (Freire, 1972; Shor, 1998; and hooks, 1999). In some patriarchal countries, class and racial issues mask gender oppression since this form of oppression is, sometimes, not seen as relevant to society. However, there is a need for us to perceive that gender oppression also has to be addressed in order to make transformation at all levels in society possible.

Both feminist methodology and the Freirean method elucidate that it is throughout an understanding of self and society that transformation occurs. For both frameworks, the personal is political and vice-versa. Human beings are subjects of the world and therefore should act to construct and de-construct forms of knowledge. Feminist methodologies help researchers and researched to reflect on their roles as women as subjects of the world while the Freirean method, for being political in nature, help us to reflect that the personal is political.



Therefore, these methodological frameworks help us, women, engage in deconstructing oppressive forms of knowledge.

The use of a feminist methodology can enlighten research studies in the field of adult education in that it helps researcher and researched to see gender as a significant piece of the literacy acquiring process. Freire's ideas and philosophy within his method can be enlightened by a feminist methodology in that it gives the researcher and the participants the possibility to understand hierarchical levels of oppression in society. It gives the Freirean method a new form to approach oppression and discards that notion that we are commonly oppressed in society. Hierarchical levels of oppression do exist and should be addressed within any theory or method. Other forms of oppression in society commonly obscure gender oppression and this has to be addressed in research studies that employ a feminist framework.

Feminist theorists and Paulo Freire have developed theories of oppression that are capable to question the status quo and transform society. These theories have helped feminist theorists and critical theorists to engage in a cycle of reflection in which they were capable of practicing theory that consequently gave them the possibilities to create new theories capable of theorizing their practices.

By intersecting Freire's pedagogy and method with a feminist methodology, I intended to give my study a cycle of action-reflection-action, a process Freire called "conscientization." According to Heany (1998), conscientization involves "identifying contradictions in experience through

dialogue and becoming a subject with other oppressed subjects, that is, becoming part of the process of changing the world” (p. 9).

What seems to be similar between a feminist methodology and the Freirean pedagogy is this cycle of action-reflection-action that is capable of making participants aware of their world. This process of reading their worlds, named by Freire as conscientization, might enable researchers to design research studies that are capable of having a “returning to the community” effect (Benmayor, 1991).

In the next section, I describe my research process. In describing such a process, I tried to link my theory with my practice and create a process that could be significant to the kind of study I carried with the women in the MST.

### **The Research Process**

Developing this project with the Brazilian landless movement has been fascinating. I have been engaged in issues of social transformation since my first encounter with Paulo Freire’s ideas back in 1988, when I was a college student. It was in 1988 that I realized that as an educator I had a commitment to change my world and help other people to change theirs. I have always been a woman in movement who always wanted to make a difference in my life and empower myself as a woman and as a citizen of the world. My identity has been constructed and de-constructed throughout the years I have been living in Brazil and in the United States.

My journey in the United States and the dialogue I have engaged in with my colleagues and teachers have helped me read my world as a woman. The classes I took on feminist theories and curriculum development have helped me understand what kind of feminist educator I wanted to be. This dialogue enriched my life so significantly that I decided to apply what I have learned in the development of a study that could make a difference for people in my home country. As I discussed above, I wanted to return to my community what I have learned and gained during my years living abroad. In addition to that, I wanted to return to my home country and learn more about my self as a woman from a developing country.

**My topic: writing a piece of my history with the MST**

I remember returning home on a chilly winter afternoon in November 1999. It was right after I finished my masters thesis. While the bus driver announced the next stop, I sat in the back thinking about a research study that would be meaningful to my country. All my reflections, fears, and desires on my way home that afternoon would certainly make a wonderful book on reflexivity. I thought about my life as a little girl living in the countryside in Brazil and also thought about my father and his struggle to take care of his peach orchard on such a limited budget. My reflections about my father brought back hard memories about transnational companies like Monsanto that only care about making profit in Third World countries.

I like to see myself as a dreamer because we can only transform the world if we have a dream. A dream so big that can keep us moving on. In this dream, I thought of a world without pesticides, where people would share experiences and learn from each other, a world where people cared about the sustainability of the environment and family agriculture. One reflection led to another and I ended up thinking about the MST in Brazil and everything they had achieved in almost 20 years of existence. After that chilly afternoon on the bus, I started searching for literature on the MST and became very interested in learning more about it. Somehow, I had a connection with them since I grew up in a small farm in the south of Brazil, where the movement was founded in 1984.

My decision to do research with the MST was final but I did not have a topic. Or maybe I had thousands of topics that would be interesting to do research on but I wanted to do something that would be meaningful to them and me as well. In the Fall of 1999, I took a class on Sociology of Gender and wrote a paper on Paulo Freire and feminist theories. When I wrote this paper, I learned that some feminist scholars had criticized Paulo Freire because most of his works did not address issues of gender. After reading a body of literature on the MST, I learned that the movement was interested in literacy and that Freire's philosophy was one of the main foundations of the movement itself. However, I thought about developing a literacy program to address gender issues in the MST. Somehow, it all made sense to me. This reflexivity process I engaged about my

self and where I came from and wanted to go helped me choose a dissertation topic that was meaningful to me and to my community as well.

### **Arriving at Natureza<sup>1</sup> and meeting my participants**

I name the MST settlement I worked with Natureza (meaning nature in Portuguese) because the sustainability of the environment was always on the top list of goals among the group of people who lived there. Also because I had the opportunity to be in an almost perfect balance with my mind, body, and the wonders of nature while working in the settlement. Spending time inside Natureza settlement made me be in touch with my self as well. In being in touch with my self, I learned that entering my participants' worlds with humility and respect would guide me to make my research meaningful to them.

I learned about Natureza settlement when Maria,<sup>2</sup> an MST leader, visited Iowa State University in October 2002. Maria happened to be from the same southern state where I was born and where Natureza is located. When I met Maria in 2002, my plan was to work with the settlement I had previously researched in the summer of 2000. However, my plans changed after I arrived in Brazil. Natureza settlement was located closer to the place I stayed and therefore would make my trips back and forth to the site easier.

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<sup>1</sup>Natureza is the name of the settlement where I conducted this study.

<sup>2</sup>Pseudonym I gave my informant.

Natureza settlement was settled in 1998. It is a rather new one considering that the MST was founded in 1984. The settlement shelters 35 families but only 15 families participate in the “agro-village” system, in which people worked as a community. They worked the fields and shared the profits among these 15 families. The other 20 families lived in the settlement but decided to work their own fields and not be part of the “agro-village” system. The participants of this study lived in the agro-village.

When I arrived at the settlement, Maria told me that people are free to choose what they believe is best for them. According to her, “the movement does not force people to do anything.” Maria was of great help to me during the first week I spent in the settlement. She functioned as my informant and helped me get around the settlement. Maria was the only connection I had with the settlement since we had previously met in the United States five months before I started developing my study with them.

Natureza settlement is an 800-acre farm located 100 miles south of Porto Alegre, the capital of Rio Grande do Sul state. Out the 800 acres that were occupied by 35 families in 1998, only 300 acres are used by the group of people who participate in the agro-village system. Although they produce vegetables and fruits that they sell to the local community, their main produce is organic rice. The 15 families participating in the agro-village system were very interested in organic agriculture and the sustainability of the environment. When they first

occupied the land in 1998, they saw the need to work with sustainable and organic agriculture which are among the main goals of the MST as a whole.

I met my participants the first day I arrived in the settlement. Ica, Preta, Patricia, and Julia<sup>3</sup> were the first women who welcomed me to the settlement. They were eager to talk to me about my research and very curious to know more about it. They told that they needed this kind of study in the settlement because “men are very machista here”—mentioned Ica. I had a group of nine people in my classes after we actually started the program but I chose Ica, Preta, Patricia, and Julia to be my participants in this study because they agreed to be interviewed since the first moment I told them I was conducting interviews. We engaged in dialogue the first day I arrived in the settlement and therefore I have more data on them than the other people who participated in the classes. In addition to that, Ica, Preta, Patricia and Julia were always present in my classes while the others were not present on a regular basis.

### **Data Collection**

#### **Engaging in dialogue: the interviewing process**

It is hard for me to think about the dialogue I had with my participants as interviews. The dialogue we engaged in about gender other issues relevant to them as women carried a political framework in that we engaged in making sense of our worlds (Freire, 1972). There were times, in the dialogical approach, that I

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<sup>3</sup>Pseudonyms I will use to refer to my participants.

had to answer their questions as well. They wanted to know as much about me as I wanted to know about them. The theoretical framework I used helped me reflect upon my role as a researcher and therefore be also part of the study.

Our conversations opened up a new world of discoveries for me. They enabled me to see that although I did not share with them the oppression of being landless, we shared the fact that we were women living within the same net of patriarchy in Brazil. However, I did not intend to create a false sisterhood (hooks, 1997) during the development of my study, but certainly our dialogues helped me understand that we had more similarities than I had anticipated.

I interviewed Ica, Preta, Patricia, and Julia three times during the development of the study. Before conducting the interview, I sought my participants' permission to have the interviews audio-taped. In the first phase of the interview process, I wanted to get as much information as possible about how women perceived themselves as women inside the settlement. Since I did not have much information about Natureza settlement, I had to conduct what ethnographers call community research, when researchers collect data about the communities they will work with prior to the development of the study. Therefore, I conducted my community research during the first week I spent in the settlement and gathered information about how women perceived gender issues inside the settlement. In the second phase of the interview process, I interviewed women on their views about literacy and empowerment and discussed the literacy project they were developing. In the third phase, I addressed whether the literacy project



we developed helped them advance the dialogue about gender issues in the settlement (see Appendix A for interview questions).

All the interviews were conducted in my participants' mother tongue, Portuguese. They were all held at Natureza settlement and at times chosen by my participants. I was careful to choose a time that they were not engaged in any major activity inside the settlement so we would not be interrupted. I carefully transcribed all my interviews into Portuguese and then translated into English when necessary. And I also shared the transcriptions with my participants and asked them to reflect upon their answers to my questions.

### **I am human, therefore I observe: the observation process**

Spending time at Natureza settlement was an experience I will never forget. My reflections, my feelings, anxiety, and desires would probably provide me with enough data to write more than one dissertation. However, this is humanly impossible given the time constraint I am working with. But I will consider my reflections as a significant part of this study.

Over the course of five months, I spent 5 weeks total at the settlement. During these five months, I spent one week in the settlement each month. Our literacy classes met three times a month, all during the week I spent in the settlement. However, I had time to observe my participants in their daily routine and also engage in activities they each performed daily. I participated in activities such as: baking bread, working in the fields, and doing the dishes. These activities made me feel more comfortable around my participants and they also

brought back memories of my childhood since I also grew up on a farm and engaged in the same activities with my parents. My observations helped me reflect upon my role as a researcher and helped me feel more comfortable inside the settlement. In the next section, I discuss my role as a researcher and how this played a significant role in the development and implementation of my study.

### **Making sense of my world and their voices: analyzing my data**

In feminist research studies, the analysis process should be a process in which the researcher can construct a social critique of her work. It is in this process that researchers make sense of the participants as social beings “whose experiences are mediated by and in turn mediate the social world in which she lives” (Bloom, 2002, p. 310). In analyzing my data, I engaged in a process of making sense of my world and the world of my participants. Interpreting their voices was blurred and difficult at times because what I perceived and observed was only true to my eyes (Lugones, 1997).

In order to interpret my participants' voices, I carefully watched for themes that emerged throughout the implementation of the study. In feminist research studies as well as in any Freirean-inspired literacy programs, themes emerge within the dialogic approach that engage both researcher and researched during the study. Themes are socially constructed and therefore embody “the learner's social, political, and cultural reality” (Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000, p. 14). My decision to look at themes that emerged during my study helped me interpret my

participants' voices more accurately and also gave them the possibility to reflect upon important aspects of their social-political reality.

I transcribed the taped interviews and coded my data according to themes that emerged during the developmental process of the study. My participants' stories about their personal lives and their views about their worlds were analyzed through the lenses of feminist theories and the Freirean theories and method.

What I attempted to do in my analysis was to identify and map out themes that could help me intersect feminist theories and the Freirean ideas and method, therefore I used a method of content analysis from both feminist theories and Freire's ideas. I first followed the strategy of feminist theorists in which

studying life history narratives focused on women include the following: they illustrate the relationship between individual and society; they demonstrate how women negotiate their "exceptional" gender status in their daily lives; and they make possible the examination of the links between evolution of subjectivity and the development of female identity.

(Bloom & Munro, 1995, p. 100)

In illustrating the relationship my participants had between individual and society (Bloom & Munro, 1995) and how they perceived themselves as women inside the settlement, I followed the strategy of the Freirean method in which individuals have to perceive their oppression in order to work towards ending it (Freire, 1972). In reading their worlds using the lens of feminist theories I hoped

to better understand my participants' process of developing a literacy project that would attend to their needs as women inside Natureza settlement.

I started analyzing my data with the first interview and the first observation. This gave me the chance to make adjustments as the research process developed. After my first visit to the settlement, I looked for themes<sup>4</sup> that emerged from my first contact with my participants. This process guided my subsequent interviews and also allowed me to make sense of my observations.

The approach I used to analyze my data also involves attending to my participants "in relation to society and takes into account the influence of gender, class, and family beginnings" (Denzin, 1989, p. 17). In using this approach, I entered my participants' worlds and tried to interpret their voices in relation to this world. However, my data analyses was the generation of a story in which my participants and I played a significant role in reflecting about our selves as women and how this influenced the Freirean-inspired literacy program we developed.

In analyzing my data, I tried to paint a comprehensive picture of how the experiences of women in the MST shaped their views on gender. I found it important to include this emerging theme into my analyses because I believe that this was an important piece of knowledge that was highly significant to the study.

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<sup>4</sup>These themes are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

**Reflections of my own: my role as a feminist researcher and an activist**

My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. (Lorde, 2000, p. 283)

My definition of feminism reflects my cultural background, my social class, my ethnicity, the way I see the world, the way I want to see the world, and the kind of educator I am and want to be. With all this in mind, I entered a world, and although it was a world happening right there in my country, I have never been part of it. I say I have never been part of it because I have never walked in the shoes of a landless peasant. Being a woman from a low-income family, I have faced different kinds of oppression in life, but I have never been landless. I entered these women's world searching for answers and not only answers that would help me with my research questions, but also for answers that could help me understand what it is to be a woman in my country. I was not able to find all the answers to all my questions but the searching process is what mattered to me. In the searching process, my participants and I had the opportunity to engage in a dialogue that strengthened us as women, and strengthened our causes and our struggles.

However, as I mentioned earlier, I did not try to create a false "sisterhood" (hooks, 1997) where I assumed that we women are commonly oppressed. This

would deny the “true nature of women’s varied and complex social reality” (hooks, 1997, p. 485). I am aware of, and firmly believe, that oppression comes in a variety of forms and uses different faces. Also, I was aware of my privileged position among my participants. But all these issues contributed to our dialogue and especially to my desire to understand myself better as a woman from a Third World country, as a researcher, and as an educator. My intention was to enter my participants’ world as a traveler, which according to Lugones (1997) “is part of knowing them and knowing them is part of loving them” (p. 159). I entered this world as a traveler who hoped to “understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes” (Lugones, 1997, p. 158).

I entered a world where addressing all oppressions was the hallmark of a liberatory research design. My participants face multiple forms of oppression and “contending that feminist consciousness and theory emerged from the personal, everyday reality of being female,” (King, 1997, p. 229) denies the reality of my participants. Denying my participants’ reality is denying mine as well. What was at stake was “whether female experience and the world view constructed by female activity can meet the criteria for a standpoint” (Hartsock, 1997, p. 474). As Hartsock (1997) so well elucidates,

women’s material life activity has important epistemological and ontological consequences for both the understanding and construction of social relations. I believe that women’s activities can be one of the requirements “to meet the criteria for a standpoint” but because we are “embodied

humans” we are of course inextricably both natural and social, though feminist theory to date has, for important reasons, to concentrate attention on the social aspect. (p. 463)

Historically, “women’s lives, like men’s, are structured by social relations that manifest the experience of the dominant gender and class” (Hartsock, 1997, p. 478). However, I believe that as Brazilian women, my participants and I share multiple forms of oppression and it was with this in mind that I entered their world.

When I started developing this project with the landless women, I thought about making my study a standpoint for both my participants and me to look at our own lives as sites of change in our contexts. My participants’ worlds and my world, even though we were born and raised in the same country, differed considerably due to class issues primarily. But the heart of a Freirean-inspired research design is to acknowledge these differences and use them as standpoints in our search for freedom. As Lorde (2000) points out

it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation. (p. 289)

The experiences we shared were “too alien” (Lorde, 2000) for us to comprehend at first but we managed to work this out throughout the dialogical process that took place during the research period. I entered a world that was not mine, and I was aware that there was a need for differences to be recognized in

order for us, researcher and researched, “to see the different problems and pitfalls facing us as women” (Lorde, 2000, p. 291).

The process of consciousness raising in a liberatory research design is important and this was one of the keys of my study. The dialogical framework I adopted for my research design gave my participants and me the chance “to grasp the collective reality of women’s condition from within the perspective of that experience, not from outside of it” (MacKinnon, 1997, p. 74). Coming close to understanding who we are as Brazilian women, where we come from, and what kinds of oppressions we face daily in society might help us to dismantle them.

This process of understanding myself as a feminist was highly important, and I reflected upon this as soon as I returned to Brazil in December 2002. I recognize I have been living between two countries, two distinctive cultures, for a long time and that has played an important role in how I see my world. Returning to my country, after all this time has made me grow, first as a person, and as a researcher. Re-adjusting to my own culture was a challenge, but this process helped me discover myself much better as a woman in the Brazilian society. My experience living in the United States has changed me forever. The way I see my world today is filled with perceptions, definitions, theories, and practices that I, as a Third-World woman, have learned while living abroad. All these together played a role in how I entered my participants’ worlds and how I used my research to grow as a feminist in a patriarchal country such as Brazil.



In this process of discovering myself in my country, I had to understand how feminism was seen in Brazil at the time of my study. I have my own definitions of feminism and such definitions did not emerge out of thin air, they were part of my history and my identity. They were part of my history in Brazil and in the United States. Understanding how feminism was seen in Brazil helped me to learn more about women's issues in my own culture and that contributed to the way I interpreted my participants' worlds as well.

At the time I carried out this study, feminism in Brazil seemed to be something without a face, something that was still in the process of getting a shape that probably not all "feminists wannabes" knew how to define. Interestingly enough, it was in the middle of all this that I started conducting my research. Imposing my personal definitions of feminism on my participants was something that was inappropriate for my study. First, because I did not want to be a colonizer and, second, because this would not reflect the views of a Freirean-inspired literacy program. On the other hand, it was rather impossible to enter this world as an empty vessel. I could not deny where I came from and what made me a feminist. Denying that my view of feminism had to be historically contextualized would be denying the essence of my study. It would deny the essence of the Freirean-inspired project I proposed to develop. Feminism is not imposed; it is constructed and de-constructed within the dialogical approach that women, and also men, engage in with each other. Feminism emerges from the struggle of women; the struggle to be fully respected in the private and public

sphere of any society. Since feminism emerges from the struggle of women, it is in this struggle that we, women, shape our views about it.

But my decision to enter their worlds with humility and respect made all the difference. Telling my participants that my plan was not only to conduct a project that would benefit me, but above all, I wanted to carry out a project that would benefit the settlement helped me to minimize my discomfort of feeling like a tourist inside their worlds. I talked to them with my heart opened and shared my life experiences with them. We engaged in dialogues where we learned about each other and most importantly, they learned why my study was so important to me as woman and educator. The dialogical approach developed by Freire helped us share our life experiences as women and therefore helped me not enter their worlds as an empty vessel nor to impose my pre-constructed views on them. Therefore, the differences of the researcher and the researched were acknowledged, because I did not use “women” as a group in which “all of us of the same gender, across classes and cultures, are somehow socially constituted as a homogeneous group identified prior to the process of analysis” (Mohanty, 2000, p. 346). Identifying women as a group as Mohanty (2000) points out is problematic because “it assumes an ahistorical universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of their subordination” (p. 346). Gender oppression is what brings us women together, but there is a need for us to understand that this kind of oppression is historical and contextual, and viewing this otherwise, is also problematic and colonialist.

With these theories in mind, I entered a world that was not mine, and it was only my search to understand it that enabled me to understand who I am and where I came from. In this study, I did not intend to impose my views about social transformation on my participants, but I hoped that our dialogues would enable them to keep searching for paths that could help them in their liberation process. It certainly enabled me to reflect upon my life and gave me the chance to understand better what it is to be a woman in Brazil. And it is with all this in mind that I interpreted my data and made sense of the world I entered as a feminist researcher and as an activist.

### **CHAPTER 3: SHAPING THE LITERACY PROJECT— GENDER THROUGH THE EYES OF ICA, PATRICIA, JULIA, AND PRETA**

In this chapter, I present my participants, how their participation in the movement emerged, and their views about gender issues inside the settlement and discuss how these views have played an important role in the development of the literacy project. Throughout the life histories of my participants, I will address their views on feminism and discuss how these views were historically contextualized in time and space and how they played a significant role in the development of my study.

I was anxious and excited about arriving at Natureza in that beautiful and warm morning of February 2003. I wanted to find out what their reactions would be when I started talking about my research ideas. I did not know much about the history of the settlement. All I had was a desire to develop a literacy project based on Paulo Freire's ideas to address gender issues in the settlement. I had a friendly welcome when I arrived and they made sure to tell me the history of the settlement. Listening to the stories enabled me to do the community research that I was intending to. They told me about the settlement's history and how they occupied the land. During my first days in the settlement, I had the opportunity to learn about how they organized and what issues were of most interest to them as settlers.

The dialogue that I engaged in with the people during my first visit to the settlement helped ease my feeling that I had invaded their world. Our

exchange of experiences helped me feel more comfortable inside the settlement. It was also during my first visit and during the process of doing this community research so relevant to my study that I saw a significant theme emerging during my dialogues with my participants.

After discussing my research ideas with the settlement's leaders, I noticed that feminism had a negative connotation to women and also men at Natureza settlement. This became a clear theme as the project developed. The way my participants viewed themselves as women in the MST as a whole and in society was highly significant to the kind of literacy program that they helped to develop. I believe that it is important to address these issues in order to understand how my participants interwoven their views about gender with Freire's method and attempted to create a program that could attend to their needs and the needs of the settlement as well.

I also noticed that they were very interested in addressing gender issues inside the settlement and they welcomed my ideas about developing a literacy project to address such issues, which according to them, is not only relevant to the settlement but also to the MST and society as a whole. However, the word "feminism" itself, still, was not welcomed and it is as negative as the word "machismo."

Community research enabled me to see that in order to develop a literacy project based on Freire's ideas to address gender in the settlement, I had to address how my participants saw themselves as women inside the settlement. I

saw the need to learn about their histories and understand how they perceived themselves inside the settlement and movement. The literacy project I wanted to develop with them had to be based on their needs; therefore, I had to understand these needs prior to developing a project to advance the dialogue about gender. Lorde (2000) stated that

my fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. (p. 283)

The theoretical framework I adopted helped me understand that I had to integrate all the parts of my participants in order to understand their views about feminism. Their views about gender issues and what brought them together as women inside the settlement played a significant role on the literacy program they helped me develop. By using this framework, I invited my participants to “reflect the deepest ways in which people understand who they are and to whom they are connected” (Kling, 1995, p. 2). In addressing this theme that came up during my community research I gave my participants the opportunity to name and change their worlds. As Herrick (1995) points out, “new perceptions lead to new understanding, new understanding leads to new behavior, new behavior leads to new perception” (p. 3).

The theoretical framework I used helped my participants to construct their own “theory(s)” to approach oppression. In this process, my participants were

given the chance to write their history, their struggles, and most importantly, use their lives as sites for change. I will now introduce Ica, Preta, Julia, and Patricia. I hope my interpretations of their voices are just and accurate so I can make sense of their world. However, in making sense of their world, I will make no attempts to change them or impose my own views on what it is true to them. The data analyses I discuss in the next pages was the product of an intense dialogue with my participants as well as data I gathered during the observation process. The negative connotation of feminism among my participants emerged throughout the entire development of my study and not only during the interviews. This theme overlapped during the interviews and my observations and therefore, I present my interviewing and observational findings together.

**Ica: “We work together in the settlement and we have a dream that one day we will change our country and our world”**

The day I interviewed Ica is still vivid in my mind. I talked to her in the morning of a beautiful sunny day and arranged to have the interview in the afternoon. She told me she would have to ask her husband to watch over their kids while we sat and talked. She was excited about the interview and told me she “wanted to find out what kind of questions I would ask her.” I sensed that she wanted to get to know me better. As Mehra (2001) points out “who I am determines, to a large extent, what I want to study” (p. 72) and I sensed that Ica knew this.

Ica was a 34-year-old white woman who did not have many opportunities for schooling because she lived in the countryside and “had to go to the city to study and the bus fare was expensive and my family had no money.” She barely finished fifth-grade due to these circumstances. Ica was a very talkative young woman who was always eager to participate and engage in dialogue with me about life in the United States, literacy, and gender issues in Brazil.

Ica was one of the first women I was introduced to when I arrived at the settlement. She helped me invite other people to the meeting we would have to discuss the literacy project I planned to develop. I remember her telling me that “our settlement needs both, learn more about Paulo Freire’s ideas and discuss about gender.” I sensed my ideas were welcomed but she was, carefully, trying to find who I was and how Paulo Freire fit into my life.

During my first conversation with Ica, she asked me to talk about myself and tell her where I came from. However, I believe that it is more suitable for me to call my interviews dialogues because they carried a more political dimension to us in that “interactions between researcher and respondents cannot be removed from the research equation, even if one wishes to do so” (Mehra, 2001, p. 69).

Ica and I engaged in dialogues that helped us learn more about each other. As we engaged in dialogue, I was able to learn more about Ica’s life history. Since I was adopting a qualitative research methodology that was feminist in nature, I was concerned with the social and personal life history of my participants. During my conversations with Ica, I realized that I had much more to



learn than I had thought. When I developed my proposal for this project, I included observations as one means of data gathering so I could learn more about my participants and their contexts. However, in this process of observing my participants, I reflect upon my role as a researcher inside their worlds since the dialogue we were having made me think about my study and how significant it was to them as well.

I asked Ica to tell me about her life and how she joined the MST. She said that she remembers being a little girl and attending the MST meetings with her father. She mentioned that she remembered when she “was five years old, and played with my doll while they had their meetings.” The figure of her father was very strong in her life. She told me how hard it was for her family to go from one camp to another during years and years until they were settled in at Natureza.

During the interview process, Ica talked freely about her life in the MST and did not object to having our conversation audio-taped, which she was previously a little concerned about. I had open-ended questions about her life as a woman and her participation in the movement. The way I structured my interview, with open-ended questions, helped give Ica the chance to also ask questions about my life as a woman and how I saw my world. At first, I struggled to keep the interview process focused on her views of the world and not mine. However, I understood that dialogue is reciprocal and that in order for her to tell me about her views of the world, she had to find out about mine.

This dialogical approach I had with Ica, as well as my other participants, helped me see that in order to transform our reality and make our research studies meaningful to our participants and us as researchers. Ica knew this perfectly well and her interest in learning about me made the interview process fit into the dialogical approach I set for my theoretical framework.

Ica told me about the process of joining the MST. Her eyes shined and she had a timid smile when she told me about her involvement with the movement. She started talking about her father and his participation and said that “my father decided to join the movement because there were people who were joining it but I decided not to join them and went to live in another city.” Ica resisted the idea of joining the movement just because her father and other people did. This resistance process seemed to be intersected with the way she sees herself as a woman in society. During the interview process, I learned that Ica was a very independent woman who had her own views about herself and society. She mentioned that she used to visit her father after he was settled on a farm in the west side of Rio Grande do Sul state. She stated that “I used to visit my father in his settlement and by this time the money I was making in the city was not enough for me to survive.” During these visits to her father's settlement, Ica started learning more about the movement itself and decided to participate in a course the movement offered to people who were interested in joining it. She mentioned that “I participated in this course but I did not know much about the

movement. I stayed a week, only participated in the first phase of the course and gave up because of my kid, I was not used to leave him behind.”

For Ica, joining the MST was a process. She had to first learn about what the movement was about and then decide whether it would fit her needs or not. She mentioned that during a course she took with some MST leaders, she learned about Freire’s method “and then I got interested in learning more. We developed a literacy project based on his ideas in this other settlement. I then decided that I was going to participate in the movement and search for something good for me.” Her words were rather strong when she mentioned that she was the one who decided to participate in the movement and would look for something good for her self. Ica made the process of joining the movement a process of learning more about herself and what was important to her as woman and as a citizen. She did not join the movement when her father did because she did not know whether this participation fit her needs. She only joined the movement after she learned more about it. Ica’s own way of joining the movement revealed her views about herself and society. She is a strong woman who likes to make her own decisions and likes questioning the world she lives in. As she stated during the interview “we work together in the settlement and we have a dream that one day we will change our country and our world.”

This idea of Ica perceiving the movement as an organization where people work together makes her feel part of it and therefore helps her search for the construction and de-construction of the world. The transformation of the world

only occurs when people engage in dialogue about themselves and their worlds and Ica was following this process step by step. Her perceptions about the movement and the world played a significant role in how she addresses gender issues inside the settlement and also in her personal life. Her construction of gender is highly connected with her views of her self as a landless Brazilian woman and as a citizen.

When I asked Ica about her participation as a woman in the movement, she took a deep breath and said “it’s been a process.” I asked why and she started talking about her views about gender in society and then intersected these views with her participation in the MST. Ica makes conscious connections about herself and society and critically describes women’s participation in the movement. She strongly believed that women “helped in the foundation of the movement, we help the movement to discuss about certain issues.” On the other hand, she believes that “we women have still a long way to go, it’s a process”

Women’s struggle for liberation in Latin America and worldwide is a process that should not be interrupted because the “struggle never ends” as Ica pointed out during the interviews. Ica believes that gender has to be addressed in the family because “we need to change our children so they can grow up with different values.” When talking about her family, Ica reflected upon her life as a little girl and questioned gender roles. She described herself as coming “from a very traditional family who had separate roles for boys and girls.” She mentioned

that she was not happy with these roles but she, unfortunately, “did not know how to change them, they all seemed part of society.”

My interactions with Ica helped us reflect about gender roles in the Brazilian society. Our dialogue helped us reflect on how “women negotiate their ‘exceptional’ gender status in their [*our*] daily lives” (Bloom & Munro, 1995, p. 100). Engaging in dialogue with Ica gave me the opportunity to reflect on how my family played a significant role in defining my identity as a feminist. For Ica, “we inherit values from our families that will stay with us forever.” She said that she “was enabled to see the differences in gender roles in her family” before she joined the movement. When she joined the movement she “started to question the world and question things I could not understand, and gender was one them.”

As I mentioned in Chapter one, the Brazilian landless is not “merely preoccupied with combating exploitation of labor but with addressing wider problems of marginalized peoples” (Ghanem, 1998, p. 182). Therefore, I believe that Ica felt safe to question her identity as a woman inside an organization that preaches participatory democracy and equality at all levels. She did not hesitate to call men in the settlement “very machista.” She told me that “we try hard to create a new model of society but we have to understand that we are all products of a traditional society that we have to de-construct.”

Ica was able to make interconnection with society and understand the construction of herself; however, when she addressed the word “feminism,” she had the same negative tone in her voice as when she referred to the word

“machismo.” She mentioned that the fact of having women addressing gender issues in the settlement did not mean that they “wanted to be called feminists.” Ica went on to say that “we want our rights, that’s all.”

When I wrote my research proposal for this study, I anticipated that entering my participants’ worlds would be fascinating, but not easy. I kept in mind that we shared different experiences and perhaps interpreted the Brazilian society differently. However, I had not anticipated that the word “feminism” would have such a negative meaning to my participants. At first, I thought that I, as the researcher, should help them define their views of feminism. I reflected upon the idea of engaging in a dialogue about feminism with them and help them construct their own views about it. On the other hand, I had to be careful to address concepts that, for my participants, were colonialist and oppressive. I had to acknowledge the “true nature of women’s varied and complex social reality” (hooks, 1997, p. 485). Therefore, I chose to let them construct their own definitions about gender issues and construct these definitions in their own “complex social reality.”

For Ica, feminism was not part of their daily realities. As Paulo Freire stated “I am convinced that it is not possible to discuss language without discussing power” (Freire, 1972, p. 29). My research study proposed to develop a literacy program to address gender in the Brazilian landless movement, therefore the whole issue of language had to be taken into consideration. The

ideologies behind the word “feminism” were oppressive and colonialist for my participants and this had to be recognized.

In order for me to recognize this, I had to engage in a reflexivity process that would allow me to understand that my identity and subjectivity were constructed within a “complex social reality,” both in Brazil and in the United States; therefore, imposing my participants to embrace the word “feminism” in their search for liberation would have been oppressive and colonialist as well.

My decision to enter their worlds as a traveler and not as a tourist (Lugones, 1997) helped me not impose my definitions on my participants. It took years for me to develop my own definition of feminism and what it represented to me as a Third World woman, and I was fortunate enough to have been given the opportunity to construct this identity engaging in dialogue with other women in Brazil and in the United States. Besides, I understood that women engage in feminist activities differently. Sometimes they do not even name their activities “feminist” because of ideologies that are linked to the word.

There is not one single definition of feminism that could represent the views of all women around the world. A single definition of feminism would trap us women inside a nutshell and would not let us understand it is our gender, our social reality, our social class, and our ethnicity that contribute to shape our identities as women. As Willis (2001) points out in a research study conducted with African American women, “we had a unique view of the world—a view born out of a history of race, class, and gender oppression that helped to shape our

ways of interpreting the world” (p. 46). This “unique view of the world” is what shapes our identities as women and citizens and guides us to embrace a liberation process that is true and meaningful to us only.

In giving feminism a negative connotation, Ica was reading her world; a world that she wanted to de-constructed in the dialogical approach. What is at stake here is how Ica’s views about women’s issues would shape the literacy program we were developing. I wanted to find out how this view she had of herself and society would contribute to the development of a Freirean-inspired literacy that could meet her needs.

In developing a literacy program that could attend to her needs in the settlement, Ica had to read her world and decide what was best for herself, the settlement, and the movement itself, and Brazil. In doing so, she reflected upon her life as a woman and how the ideologies that contributed to the construction of her life played a significant role. In one of our conversations, Ica mentioned, when I asked her about her participation in the movement that “we work together in the settlement and we have a dream that one day we will change our country and our world.” Her answers helped me reflect on the idea that perhaps my participants were embracing the struggle against gender oppression together and that their views about feminism were probably alike. And if they were alike, they could probably contribute to the field of feminist studies in that they were constructing new forms of knowledge (or perhaps theories).



In the next section, I interpret Patricia's voice and try to make sense of her world and my world as well. Like Ica, Patricia had very specific views about her the construction of her self and women's issues in the settlement as well. Her views contributed to the development of the literacy program, they guided me to understand her world better, and also helped me reflect upon my role as a researcher and as a feminist.

**Patricia: "As a woman, I want my freedom at home and in the settlement"**

The first day I arrived in the settlement, Maria, my informant, told me about Patricia. She mentioned that Patricia "would be a good person for you to work with." I did not understand why until my first interaction with Patricia. Patricia never got tired of engaging in a good dialogue. She had a very good sense of humor, and I miss all our conversations in the settlement's kitchen while she baked bread and cookies. At first, I thought she was not interested in the project and was somewhat suspicious of my intentions, but after our conversations, I changed my mind. Like Ica, Patricia wanted to know me; she wanted to know how I was and what I wanted from them.

She mentioned during one of our conversations that "people come here all the time and do research and we never know about what they found out about us after they leave, because they never come back." I assured her I had no intentions of being one of these people and my decision of working with landless women in Brazil was part of my identity and my commitment to help people in my

country. I told her I wanted to give something back to my community since I understood I occupy a privileged position in society.

I remember looking at Patricia, a 37 year old woman who had divorced her husband 8 months before I arrived in the settlement, and thinking about my self as a divorced woman in Brazil. Patricia was bitter and I could sense she was searching for somebody who could understand her as a divorced woman in a patriarchal society. I began my work addressing bell hooks' notion that we should not create a false sisterhood, that we are not commonly oppressed, and that oppression comes in different forms and has many liars. Patricia and I were different, we had constructed our histories differently but there was something that connected us as women. Her stories about being separated from her husband and her sadness about experiencing discrimination in the settlement brought back some sad memories to me. Being a divorced woman, I faced, perhaps, the same discrimination that Patricia was facing since we both had to deal with being discriminated against in a patriarchal society.

The notion that we are commonly oppressed is problematic and will not bring us women together. However, there is a need for us to understand that as women, we face gender oppression and that this can bring us together in our search for liberation because it is within our differences that we find our similarities and these similarities can help us construct a true sisterhood capable of guiding us to liberation. As Mauthner (1998) stated that a way "of representing sister relationship during the research process is by focusing on life events and

turning-points in the women's lives as sisters" (p. 46). Facing discrimination as divorced women brought Patricia and me together and helped us find common similarities.

In my first interaction with Patricia, I sensed that she was, somehow, trying to find a connection between us. Patricia wanted to trust me as a woman and as a researcher. During our dialogue she mentioned that when I arrived in the settlement "I did not know who you were and what you wanted from us." Therefore, I decided to tell Patricia who I was and decided to share with her my life history. Since I believed that she was more interested in knowing me as a woman, I started telling her about my views as a woman in Brazil and in the United States.

In engaging in this dialogue with Patricia about my life as a woman, I realized how bitter I was for being discriminated against just because I was divorced. And I had more anger towards Brazil than the United States. At first, I did not know why but after my dialogue with Patricia, I understood that Brazil was my home and I did not want to see my home as an unsafe place for me to live. There was a time during our dialogues that I felt really sad and wanted Patricia's support. I have never reflected upon my life as a divorced Brazilian woman before.

The dialogical approach that Patricia and I engaged in helped me see what it is like to be a divorced woman in a patriarchal society. Such an approach enabled Patricia and me to reflect upon our lives and also helped us understand

that our similarities could help us find a connection between us that would guide us to understand our selves. As Acker and Esseveld (1991) stated

the research process becomes a dialogue between the researcher and the researched, an effort to explore and clarify the topic under discussion, to clarify and expand understanding; both are assumed to be individuals who reflect upon their experiences and who can communicate those reflections. (p. 140)

Sharing my experiences with Patricia made me feel more comfortable around her and consequently made my analysis of her world more just and accurate. In addition, I gained Patricia's trust what helped me understand her self and her participation in the movement.

Patricia could talk for hours about what it was to be a woman in Brazil and in the movement. Her decision to participate in the movement started after a meeting on women's issues she attended in 1987. During this meeting, Patricia "watched a video about the first land occupations in Rio Grande do Sul and what the MST was about." At first, she said she was reluctant and did not like the idea of joining the movement but then "my ex-husband was elected president of a trade union... you know... and they started helping people to organize. At first, I did not want him to join the movement but then I learned more about it and decided to do it."

Like Ica, Patricia wanted to learn more about the movement itself and then make her own decision about joining it or not. The MST carries a philosophy that

is highly intersected with what Freire called conscientization, a process where people become subjects of the world and act upon changing it. This process not only enables people to make their own decisions but also helps them transform their realities.

Before settling at Natureza, Patricia had to move from one place to another and went through some hard periods of her life living in a tent with her family for more than four years. She said it was a difficult period of her life but “I learned more in these four years of my life than I learned in my lifetime because it was there that I learned to respect people and understand that it does not matter if you belong to a different race, it’s all the same and we learned that the more people we have fighting for the same goals, it’s better to reach them.” Patricia mentioned this more than once during my conversations with her. Facing discrimination herself after she divorced her husband made Patricia read her world from a different perspective and helped her understand that discriminating against anybody would not help the movement move forward.

Patricia believes that women’s participation in the movement could be better. She mentioned that women “don’t challenge themselves, there are some that could be good leaders but machismo is a big deal inside the settlement, we advance to a certain point and then we are discriminated against and we don’t advance our participation.” For Patricia, families at Natureza are still very traditional with specific gender roles to women and men. She complained that did not have time to participate in positions of leadership inside the movement

because “all I did was took care of my kids.” Patricia believes that there is a need to re-structure the family at Natureza settlement and give the men more house chores than they currently have so women could have more time to participate in the movement’s activities.

The dialogues that Patricia and I engaged helped me learn about her and how she constructed her identity as a woman and as a citizen. I learned that Patricia was going through some changes in the way she was herself in society. Being discriminated against made her face a different kind of oppression that helped her understand herself better as a woman. Patricia was very aware of gender differences in society and believed that “there is no way for us to change this *machista* society if we don’t fight against this, and men need to participate as well... you know.”

Patricia mentioned that when she joined the movement she noticed that her husband “had access to information, he graduated from school, he took a lot of courses, he had more access than I do, he knew I was right when I complained about this but you know...he is machista and this does let him advance...” Her husband’s behavior towards her rights as woman in the settlement and society was one of the reasons she filed for a divorce. She told me that she reflected about her marriage and came up with the decision of getting divorced. Patricia was aware of her oppression as a woman and mentioned that “I had to change a little, I don’t think it is wrong to do what we want as women...because at home I

was controlled by my parents, they did all the talking for me... I think that for us to change as women, we need to make our own decisions.”

As I began analyzing my data, I became increasingly aware of the need for me to include my voice in the analysis process of my study. I included as part of my proposal my own reflexivity, but I had not anticipated this would play a major role in the development of my study. As I engaged in dialogue with my participants, I learned that I had to reflect upon my self and look for answers that could explain all the harsh feelings I had towards my own culture. My dialogue with Patricia helped me understand that one of the reasons I, sometimes, felt so uncomfortable inside my own country was due to all the discrimination that a divorced woman has to face living in a patriarchal country such as Brazil.

Ribbens (1998) stated in her article Hearing my Feeling Voice that:

I do not find it helpful to think about some voices as being “out there” while other voices are inside my head. I see the boundaries between outside and inside more permeable and contingent than that. Some voices may literally be expressed by others around me in my current life, but some voices may also be voices from the past, which were out there but which I have incorporated and reshaped, and now echo in my mind, even below my conscious awareness. (p. 29)

Our conversations helped me reflect upon my feeling voice and understand that I had to reflect about it in order to understand what it was like to be a Brazilian woman. My research, however, was not only enabling my

participants to look at their lives as sites for change but also, it was enabling me to reflect upon my life as site for transformation as well.

Using our lives as sites for transformation enables us to reflect upon our identities and engage in a search for answers on how these identities were constructed. Patricia's awareness of her ex-husband's oppression helped her use her own life as site for transformation and file for a divorce. She was aware of her oppression as a woman and believed that "the movement needed to open a space where we could address gender issues in the family... together I think, men need to understand that this need has to be addressed... we cannot issues gender issues among women only... you know." However, like Ica, Patricia refused to be called a feminist because feminism, for her, was associated with machismo, which she highly condemned as a tool of oppression inside the settlement.

It was interesting to note that for my participants being a feminist would make them be men haters and hatred was something they highly rejected in their search for liberation. I remember that Ica once told me that they were fighting for their rights as women, but they "did not want to take men's place... because if we do it so, we will not end oppression." Ica's words reflected Freire's notion that the oppressed have to liberate themselves and their oppressors for the liberation process to be transformative. For my participants, machismo, which is based on the hatred of women, was preventing them from advancing the discussion on gender in the settlement and they highly condemned such an "ism." Feminism



was also an “ism” that would also prevent them from “talking about things that are important for us as women in the settlement and in the movement,” Preta said.

When this theme of feminism having a negative connotation began to emerge, I was not sure about how to approach it. One possible explanation to the negative connotation of the word “feminism” might have links to the idea that feminism came from the West and therefore “we don’t want to be called feminists”—as Patricia said. There is a negative ideology behind the word that was socially constructed in the country during women’s suffrage in the early 1930s. It was during this time that women started to organize to fight for their right to vote that feminism started to emerge. At this time, women who participated in the suffrage movement belonged to the upper class and did not represent the poor and underrepresented women who lived in the shantytowns and other poor neighborhoods around the country (Jardim-Pinto, 2003).

Another possible explanation is that the word “feminism” in Portuguese is linguistically equivalent with “machismo” and my participants rejected “machismo” because it kept women oppressed and blocked the movement to advance democracy. Unfortunately, the data I collected cannot support either of my explanations because I decided to leave the word “feminism” out of our discussions since my participants were uncomfortable talking about it. However, I believe that their views of gender is centered on their struggle for liberation. In refusing to be called “feminists,” my participants developed a literacy program

where women and men were free to engage in dialogues about the constructions of their identities as landless and Brazilian citizens.

The frameworks I adopted for my study helped me understand that knowledge is socially constructed within the dialogic approach and that my participants were also constructing forms of knowledge that were meaningful to them as women. As Patricia pointed out during our conversations “you will get a lot from us because you came here with humility and respect and we like this.” Her words brought tears to my eyes and she noticed that and said “I like you” and smiled. Patricia sensed that I talked with an open heart and was also there to understand myself. The dialogic approach was helping me to reflect upon my life and construct and de-construct forms of knowledge that played a significant role in my life as a Brazilian woman.

In the next section I introduce Julia, a dedicated mother and wife, who helped me understand better of how relations of gender are socially constructed within the family as well.

**Julia: “We help men in the discussion so we have our rights as well”**

Julia was a 40-year-old woman who barely finished fourth grade. At first, she was more of a listener than a speaker. Julia was very concerned about our first interview because she was not sure she “could answer all my questions.” She was sweet and was always inviting me to have dinner at her house when I visited the settlement. I noticed she was interested in my study, but she was too shy to tell me. During my visits to Natureza settlement, I spent a lot of time with

her. We used to talk about social and political issues in Brazil while we drank *chimarrão* (a traditional kind of tea very popular in Rio Grande do Sul). She loved to listen to my stories about my family and my life in the United States.

I first interviewed Julia during a windy afternoon. Before I started the interview, she told me that “gender is very important and that we need somebody to come here and help us discuss this.” At first, I did not like her idea of me being there to help them discuss gender issues. I was there to engage in dialogue and this dialogue would, hopefully, help them to advance the gender discussion in the settlement, not the opposite. But after I learned more about Julia, I understood that her words meant to make me feel comfortable around her and in the settlement. Each one of my participants had a different way of making me feel comfortable around them. This was Julia’s way of welcoming me.

Julia joined the movement with her husband Antonio. Like Ica and Patricia, Julia also had to live in a tent with her family for more than four years. She told me it was really hard to live in a tent during the winter. Julia spent two years living in a tent in Pelotas, one of the coldest and most humid cities in the southern part of Brazil. I knew exactly how hard it must have been for her to be living in a camp in Pelotas since I was also born in Pelotas and know how cold winters can be.

During the first phase of my interview process, I sensed Julia was a little tense and was giving short answers to my questions. I decided not to start addressing her views about gender and her participation in the movement until

she felt more comfortable with my questions and me. Therefore, I started talking about Pelotas and how my family always complains about the winter and all the respiratory diseases they face because of the cold and the humidity. Julia listened carefully about what I had to say about my hometown and started talking about her experience with the winter in Pelotas. I noticed she was a little more comfortable after she found out I understood her experience of living under a tent in Pelotas.

Talking about my hometown brought back good and bad memories of my childhood and how we used to spend time at home during the winter season. I remember that my brother and I used to sit around the table and play cards while my mother either watched *telenovelas* (soap operas) or was in the kitchen cooking or doing dishes. My father used to spend a lot of time at this bar nearby playing cards and drinking. He was a nice and caring person but unfortunately, I grew up having to see my father drunk almost every day. I remember I used to go to bed thinking I had to do something to help but, as a child, I did not know what. The only thing I could do was to ask him not to do it anymore. As I grew up, I decided that my way of helping him was to make sure he knew he was loved. I used to ask him to find out why he was an alcoholic and understand that if he did not change his behavior, he could destroy our family forever. Most of the times, I was my mother's only hope and voice.

Julia and I had a connection. We have lived in the same city. Our life histories were constructed differently. My father is a small farmer who struggles

to survive under many economic problems that Brazil faces, but we have never been landless. But our connection caused a chain of reaction that made me reflect about me as a child and how hard it was for me to cope with my father's problem. I have no regrets about trying to help my father, but this process played a significant role in constructing my identity. I grew up thinking I had to solve the world's problems and rarely address my very own. I now understand that the process of transformation starts from within; it starts when we reflect upon where we came from and how this played a role in defining us as women.

At first, I did not know if being at Natureza made me feel safe to address some issues in my life that I rarely do or the frameworks I adopted for my study and the dialogue we were engaging contributed to this reflexivity process. I later realized that all have contributed to this process. Although my participants mentioned that men at Natureza were macho men, I felt safe there. I felt safe among the women. I noticed that they were struggling to name their world differently and that now I was also part of this process.

Talking about Pelotas we lived in helped Julia to open up and relax during the interview process. She seemed more at ease to talk about her participation as a woman in the movement.

Julia saw women's participation in the movement as "weak... it could be better." She mentioned that because of gender roles, women spent too much time doing house chores and "we have kids and we don't have time to participate in the movements' activities more often." Julia stated that living in the agro-village

where people live in a community and share all the work is better because “women have more time...” to participate. However, according to Julia, this is not enough because what it is being shared is the work at a public level only. The house chores are not divided equally between women and men and therefore women end up with more work.

Even maintaining her views that women’s participation could be better in the movement, Julia believes that participating in the movement helps women “to see better... we help plan things, we see beyond... the men once told us that we see things that they don’t and that this was good.” This notion of seeing beyond stated by Julia intersects with Freire’s ideas that after the oppressed recognizes her/his oppression, she/he can see beyond and help bring to the discussion topics that need to be addressed. For Julia, women in the MST could see beyond and name the world as having different forms of oppression that also needed to be addressed.

Julia believes that men and women need to have the same rights and responsibilities inside the movement. She stated that discussing gender issues should be done by “men and women together.” Julia’s views about gender discussion in the settlement did not differ from Ica and Patricia. They all believed that men have to participate in the discussion. Her views about feminism also did not differ from Ica and Patricia. Julia was firm when she stated that “people in the settlement are saying we are feminists just because we are putting together... you know... this literacy project to discuss gender... some women do not want to

participate because of this idea.” I sensed Julia was a little reluctant, at first, to participate in the project because of this idea that women who would participate in the project would be labeled as feminists. However, it seemed that Julia’s curiosity about what my research was about made her want to participate and find out more about it.

Although each of my participants shared similar life histories as landless women, they differed from each other significantly in the way they read their world as women. I noticed that all shared the movement’s philosophy of working together to create a new society. However, they were using this philosophy as a standpoint for their struggle against gender oppression. Discussing gender was important for them as women and they found the movement to be a safe place to address such an issue. On the other hand, for my participants, addressing gender issues should not make them be labeled as feminists. Preta also shared this view and therefore I introduce her in the next section.

**Preta: “We need to discuss gender with women and men in the settlement”**

Preta was the first woman I met when I arrived in the settlement. I remember that warm evening when I arrived in the settlement after Maria, my informant,<sup>5</sup> picked me up at the bus station. I was exhausted after an eight-hour bus ride and was very anxious about arriving there because I did not know what

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<sup>5</sup>I refer to Maria as my informant since she was the person I first met from Natureza. Although Maria was not one of my participants, she helped me to get acquainted with my participants during the initial phase of my study.

to expect. At first, I thought I would spend the night at Maria's house, but she told me I would stay at Preta's house because Preta is the one who hosts people who visit the settlement.

Preta was waiting for me so we could have dinner together. She was a very energetic woman who loved to talk. We connected right away, since I love to talk as well. During my first night at Preta's house I told her briefly about my project and she seemed very interested. She told me I could count on her if I needed help setting up the program.

I interviewed Preta for the first time two days after I arrived in the settlement. She was eager to help and answer my questions. She seemed relaxed and comfortable talking to me about a variety of issues. She asked me many questions about my family, the United States and why I decided to work on a doctoral degree overseas. Like the other participants, Preta tried to learn as much as she could about me so she could understand my reasons to be engaged in a research study as such.

Preta is a 40-year-old married white woman who is proud of the fact that she successfully finished middle school. When I found out about Preta's schooling, I was not sure I could have her as one of my participants since she was the most literate participant I had in my group. However, Preta's life history brought significant contribution to our literacy project and helped the other participants shape it. She told me that "schooling, the way it is now, does not empower us to read our worlds, we have to read more to see beyond..." Preta's



view of schooling is intersected with the notion that education and schooling<sup>6</sup> differ from each other significantly. For Preta, schooling is not empowering if we do not learn how use our “own experiences to question our world.” I felt as if Preta saw in our literacy project a way to educate herself better about gender issues in the movement help other to educate themselves.

She was very political and was able to read her world and make connections in order to make it less fragmented. Preta and her husband joined the movement in positions of leadership. She has participated in a variety of activities offered by the movement and during the development of this study she was “in the movement’s financial committee.”

For Preta, women’s role in the MST “is to participate in all activities, not only in the healthcare and educational committees but also in positions of leadership... we have to challenge ourselves to break some barriers...” There seems to be a trend in women’s activities worldwide in that we are always expected to participate in activities related to healthcare and education. Preta’s views that we need to break some barriers are appropriate and had significant contribution to the advancement of gender issues in the settlement as the literacy project progressed.

Learning more about Preta’s views of the world made me understand that she strongly believed that gender has to be addressed inside the family. She

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<sup>6</sup>I discuss education and schooling more broadly in the next chapter when I address the conscientization process in the works of Paulo Freire.

always addressed the need that “nothing will ever change if we don’t change the way our family is structured,” she said during one of our dialogues.

According to Preta, empowerment is a process. She stated that “at the beginning, when I got involved in the cooperative’s activities, I was very confident because I knew people and this was a safe place, but when I engaged in activities at a state level in the movement, I was not self-confident. I thought I was not going to be able to do a good job... but now I have my both feet on the group and I’m not afraid.” Her understanding that becoming empowered is a process was part of Preta’s identity as a woman. She was a very strong woman who did not give easily. She seemed opened to challenge herself and the world. She knew that world transformation would only happen with struggle and empowering would happen within this struggle.

Discussing gender issues at Natureza was a process, that for Preta, “people had to engage in collectively... men and women working together.” She believed that she would not be able to get empowered as a woman if “my *companheiro* [partner] does not participate as well.” She believes that gender is socially constructed within the relationships men and women engage with each other in society and if this is constructed “we can break them down,” she said.

My conversations with Preta were fascinating. During my visits to the settlement, I used to stay at her house. I could observe Preta on her daily activities and sometimes even help her do the house chores. Frequently, she would stop me and reflect about gender roles in her family. She mentioned many

times that she knew that her family had specific gender roles for her daughter and son, but they were trying to change that. However, she used to state that “it is very hard to change this overnight... but we have to start somehow... I know that teaching my kids this way is contributing to keep things the way they are...”

Engaging in dialogue with Preta made me realize that she was aware of gender issues and roles and how this affected her life but she was at a very early stage of taking action to change this world. She could name the world, but transformation was coming slowly. Preta’s decision of inviting men to discuss gender issues in the settlement was an important step she took in the process of engaging in transforming her world.

The MST’s views of collective work between men and women since its foundation in 1984 seemed to play a major part on how women understood the need to address gender collectively as well. This philosophical foundation seemed to make women believe that issues of gender, class, and also race had to be interwoven. As Preta stated in one of our conversations “we have to do and discussions things collectively... we need to talk about all issues...” Talking about all issues collectively meant inviting men to be part of the process as well and Preta highly suggested me, a day after I arrived in the settlement, that I invite men to participate in my literacy project as well. I had anticipated this would emerge and I welcomed men in my classes. I believed they were a significant piece of the puzzle.

Regarding feminism, Preta's views did not differ from my other participants. "Feminism" was a word that was not in her vocabulary because it had a "very bad meaning... that is not what we are trying to address anyway... we reject machismo and we reject feminist as well..." Her rejection of feminism was firm and final.

Having the rejection of feminism by my participants as a major theme in my research study helped me understand better how my participants constructed their identities and landless women. I had to find out their construction of gender in order to develop a literacy project that would attend their needs in the settlement. Any Freirean-inspired literacy program has to address the needs of a community and it is this community that dictates what it is meaningful to them and what is not. Our literacy program was developed within a historical frame where my participants and I engaged in dialogue and in this process we share life experiences and constructed new forms of knowledge and refuse to accept oppressive forms that kept us oppressed as women and citizens in Brazil.

### **Shaping the literacy program: the dialogue must go on**

In the next chapter, I discuss the development of the literacy project. I will discuss how my participants took charge of their lives as women inside the settlement and developed a literacy program that could address gender issues. I divided Chapter 4 into four sections. In the first section, I discuss the dialogic approach and how it helped women shape the program and also improve their literacy skills. In the second section, I talk about the conscientization process and

how this helped my participants to gain control of their lives and read their worlds while the literacy program progressed. In the third section, I address how Paulo Freire's notion of praxis helped my participants to link theory to practice inside the MST and how this contributed to change in their lives as women. In the last section, I discuss the development of materials by my participants and how this contributed to their empowerment in their search for liberation.

Chapter 4 is organized within Paulo Freire's philosophy that states that individuals can only work towards transformation if they are able to construct and de-construct knowledge within the dialogical approach. It is also organized according to a feminist framework to research in which women take charge of their lives and use this process as a site for personal and societal transformation. In Chapter 4, I also discuss my role as a researcher and how the literacy project contributed to my growth as a feminist researcher and educator.

## CHAPTER 4: WHERE FREIRE MEETS GENDER

In this chapter, I discuss the literacy program and how my participants' views about the world helped them shape it. I also look at how the framework I adopted for this study enabled my participants and me to engage in a dialogue that made it possible for us to create a Freirean-inspired program that advanced the discussion on gender at Natureza settlement.

This chapter is divided in four sections. In the first section, I describe how the dialogic approach helped my participants to shape the literacy program. In the second section, I talk about the conscientization process and how this helped my participants to decide what kind of literacy program they wanted to implement at Natureza settlement. In the third section, I discuss how my participants used Freire's notion of praxis to understand themselves in relation to their settlement, the movement, and the Brazilian society. In the last section, I discuss how a Freirean-inspired literacy program and a feminist research methodology empowered my participants to take control of their lives as landless women. In this section, I also discuss materials that my participants developed to help them advance the discussion on gender in the settlement. In addition, my own thoughts of how this study helped me reflect upon my life as a Brazilian feminist researcher will be discussed in all four sections.

This chapter gives my participants and me hope, in that we try to link the theory and method of the Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire to feminist theories and methodologies in our search to create a more just society for all in Brazil. It also

helps me reflect on the need to understand that research studies cannot be transplanted, but re-invented (Freire, 1987). In writing this chapter, I reflected upon what it is like to be me in my own country and how this process of understanding who I was helped me interpret other people's voices.

### **The Dialogic Approach: Helping Women Shape the Literacy Program**

Feminist and adult education scholars worldwide have used the dialogic approach in their search to make their research studies meaningful to the community they researched (Freire, 1972; Macedo, 1994; and Graman, 1988).

As Freire & Macedo (1987) stated:

Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world... this movement from the word to the world is always present; even the spoken word flows from our reading of the world. In a way, however, we can go further and say that reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing it or rewriting it, (that is, transforming it by means of conscious, practical work, this dynamic movement is central to the literacy process). (p. 35)

Adopting a dialogic approach to our research studies can help our participants to acknowledge that the process of discovering and interpreting the world is also part of literacy programs. In addition, this approach enables us, researchers, to interpret our worlds as our research studies progress. In the field of feminist studies, the dialogic approach as Alcoff (1991) points out:

Should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others. If the dangers of speaking for others results from the possibility of misrepresentation, expanding one's own authority and privilege, and a generally imperialist speaking ritual, then speaking with and to can lessen these dangers. (p. 23)

During the development and implementation of my research study, the dialogic approach helped me understand that my role as a researcher at Natureza settlement was not to speak for others. The "speaking for others" notion does not give the researched the possibility to empower themselves during the research process. In the field of women's literacy, the dialogic approach can enable women to use their lives as powerful sites to understand their realities and transform them if they desire to.

When I started developing and implementing my research at Natureza settlement, I expected that adopting a transformative framework to my study could help me make my study meaningful to their settlement. As my research study progressed, I realized that my choice of framework played a significant role in that it helped us engage in dialogue with each other. The dialogic process we engaged helped my participants to set up a literacy program that would attend to their needs as women in the settlement and the needs of the settlement as well.

After my first visit to the settlement, I noticed that my participants were conscious of the circumstances that forced them to become landless. They



understood that poverty was socially constructed and that in order for them to de-construct ideologies that could reduce poverty and strengthen democracy, they had to keep their struggle against all forms of oppression alive. For Ica, Patricia, Julia, and Preta, the notion of “sticking together”—as Ica mentioned to me once—was an important factor for them to reach their goals. Regarding the discussion of gender issues in the settlement, my participants agreed with Ica that women and men had to stick together and “try to create new individuals, subjects capable of transforming the world.”

This notion of sticking together shared by my participants helped them shape the literacy program. During my conversations with my participants, I noticed that my participants shared the same idea about developing a literacy program that could help them advance gender issues in the settlement. They wanted to create a literacy program where women and men could participate and not only become literate, but also help them discuss a topic that had been left out of the discussions at Natureza settlement.

After I talked to them about the kind of literacy program I hoped to develop, they told me that my program “would only attend to their needs if men were invited to participate,” Preta said. I anticipated this would happen since the MST’s philosophy is bringing women and men together in the creation of a new society. My participants shared the MST philosophy and wanted to create a program open to everybody.

I remember the sunny and windy afternoon that Ica and I had to go from door to door inviting families in the settlement to participate in the literacy program. Ica was carrying her youngest kid and had a beautiful smile on her face. It seemed that she was proud of herself in some way. Before we arrived at the first house, she told me that it would be a good idea for me to talk briefly about myself to each family so they would learn more about me. She also told me briefly about each family. I was anxious to meet the first family and find out how they would react to the idea of having somebody from outside the settlement inside their home. My anxiety disappeared after I realized that literacy was a significant topic for all families. They all had a desire to go back to school and improve their literacy skills.

Observing my participants during the first week I spent at Natureza enabled me to find out that the process of engaging in dialogue about the development of a literacy program was as important as the literacy project itself. Preta once stated, “we need to have this kind of discussion at Natureza settlement.” She also said that my ideas to do a research project that could address gender issues “were timely and needed.”

I could sense that my project was welcomed and that women were engaged in dialogue about it. Our conversations in their kitchens and in the fields enabled me to understand that they seemed to know what kind of project they wanted to develop and were excited to put it in practice. Ica, my participant who already had some knowledge about Freire’s work, said that “Freire’s ideas were

welcomed as they could help women start the discussion of gender in the settlement.” Preta also knew about Freire’s works and thought it would be nice to develop such a program based on his ideas. My other two participants, Patricia and Julia, had heard about Freire before but were not very knowledgeable about his works.

The anxiety I was feeling about entering my participants’ worlds and proposing a research project that seemed interesting to me disappeared after I found out that what I was proposing was also meaningful and interesting to them. In being so, they were excited and eager to put into practice a project that they believed was needed to advance democracy at Natureza settlement. In addition, I was relieved to find out that I was not imposing anything on them, their interpretation of their worlds, the history they had with the MST, and their philosophy of working together towards creating a better world for all, helped them shape a literacy program that would attend to their needs as women and as landless people as well.

On a very warm Saturday afternoon, we gathered together to talk about the literacy project we planned to develop. Ica asked me to talk about myself to the families who came to our meeting. I remember that before I started talking, Ica introduced me and called me “companheira” (meaning comrade in English). I had tears in my eyes because they only called “companheiras” people who participate in the movement. Ica looked at me and smiled and I knew that she wanted me to feel part of the group and thanked me for being there to do a

project I believed in and something that would, perhaps, be meaningful to their community. Ica also told me that “it would be interesting if I could talk about Paulo Freire so they could learn more about his works.” They agreed that I could talk about Freire’s life and works during our first class, which was my second visit to Natureza settlement.

The dialogue my participants engaged in with each other prior to the implementation of the literacy program helped them shape a literacy program based on respect and humility. Their views of the world helped them put into practice a program where they could understand how gender issues played an important role in defining them as landless women. However, they did not want to do this alone as women. They wanted men to participate and understand that gender oppression has to be addressed if the MST is to strengthen democracy and reduce poverty in the country. They also believed that only a transformative literacy program could help them achieve their goals. Once the literacy program started, the dialogue emerging from our discussions would perhaps help “us as women to understand that there are more things involved in the kind of oppression we face than only class and race issues.” Patricia once told me this during our conversations in the settlement’s kitchen.

The dialogic approach helped my participants and me shape the literacy project and this approach was a significant piece of it as well. Our conversations helped us learn more about each other and also helped us understand relations of power in society as the literacy project progressed. Our dialogue helped us

construct a process of mutual respect and understanding, a process that helped us construct new forms of knowledge that could liberate my participants as landless women and me as a Third World woman.

However, Freire's dialogic approach was a significant piece in the development and implementation of our literacy project in that it also helped us to advance gender issues at Natureza settlement. It also gave us the chance to understand that a transformative dialogue can be of great significance in our search to become aware of our worlds.

When we become aware of our worlds, as Freire & Macedo (1987) beautifully stated,

we can go further and say that reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing it or rewriting it, (that is, transforming it by means of conscious, practical work, this dynamic movement is central to the literacy process). (p. 35)

Such an approach helped my participants to write and re-write their world as well as transform it. In addition, such an approach gave my participants the possibility to construct their worlds inside a process Freire called "conscientization." In this process, reading the *world* precedes reading the *word* and transformation happens when subjects take control of their lives and use words to change the world.

In the next section, I address the conscientization process within the works of Paulo Freire and discuss how such a process helped my participants to

improve their literacy skills and use these skills to read and re-write a world that, according to them, would be less oppressive. I also discuss how this process helped them advance the discussion of gender inside the settlement and helped me reflect on my role as a researcher.

### **The Conscientization Process: Seeing and Interpreting Our World**

Literacy skills cannot be acquired through simply memorizing a set of graphic symbols. In order for one to be able to read and write critically, there is a need for the graphic symbols to be connected with the context in which these symbols are taught. Teaching a language always carries ideologies that either serve to perpetuate structures of power or liberate groups of people from these structures.

The process of conscientization described by Freire in which subjects critically read their world and act upon transforming it can be of great help for transformative literacy programs. As Freire so well elucidated:

From the beginning, we rejected... a purely mechanistic literacy program and considered the problem of teaching adults how to read in relation to the awakening of consciousness... We wanted a literacy program which would be an introduction to the democratization of culture, a program with human beings as its subjects rather than patient recipients, a program which itself would be an act of creation, capable of releasing other creative acts, one which students would develop the impatience and vivacity which characterize search and invention. (Freire, 1973, p. 43)

The literacy program that my participants and I developed and implemented was centered in Freire's philosophy and pedagogy in that its long term goal is to promote gender discussions at Natureza and hopefully advance democracy in the Brazilian society. However, our program did not attempt to replicate Freire's, but re-invent it so we could attend to the needs of our group.

When I arrived at Natureza, I knew that dialogue was a process that would be always present throughout the development and implementation of the literacy program I had in mind. The history of participating in a social movement as the MST enabled my participants to understand that dialoguing with each other was a step towards the creation of a less oppressive society.

Our first literacy class was held on a beautiful Thursday afternoon. My participants could not hide their excitement and I could not hide my extreme anxiety. I have spent more than 15 years studying and researching in the field of Critical Pedagogy and the works of Paulo Freire, and developing and implementing this literacy project was giving me the opportunity to practice my theory. In other words, I was having the chance to link theory and practice and put together a project that was meaningful to me as a feminist researcher and activist.

Engaging dialogue with my participants about ourselves and how we interpreted our world was fascinating. Each day we discovered new things about each other. The process of developing and implementing our literacy program gave us the chance to construct new forms of knowledge that could help us in our

search for liberation. In the next section, I describe how we set up our classes and how dialogue helped us select meaningful themes to be addressed; themes that represented who we were and the world we wanted to create.

### **A Day in Our Program**

Describing a day in our literacy program brings good memories to me. I vividly remember my participants talking happily to each other. Our meetings started right after lunch when women finished their chores. They entered the room carrying nothing but notebooks and pencils. They always brought the popular *chimarrão*, which they drank during the classes. They sat in a circle so they could face each other.

The room where the classes were held was simple but represented their way of life and their beliefs. I noticed my participants felt safe there. I had a feeling that if that room could talk, it would be able to write a book on the history of Natureza settlement. Everything in the settlement had a history and I sensed that a significant part of their history had been written in that room since they used it for their monthly meetings.

My participants called the room where our meetings were held the “cooperative room” and I believe that the name represented it rather well. The building where the “cooperative room” was located belonged to their cooperative and was part of the agro-village I was working with. The “cooperative room” was built soon after they occupied Natureza. That room represented their struggle and their desire to work together towards the creation of a better place for them.



I always liked to arrive in the “cooperative room” before my participants so I could organize myself before classes started. Every day before classes I used to sit down and look at this picture of Che Guevara they had on the wall next to the MST and the Brazilian flag. That room helped me understand more about the way Natureza was organized. That room was telling me their history and was giving me the opportunity to write a piece of my history with them, as well. At first, I did not like it a lot because it was a little dark and we had to turn on the lights in the middle of the day. I thought it would be good to have more windows so we could see the sun and the children playing outside.

As our classes progressed, I began to appreciate the “cooperative room” more. The number of windows did not matter anymore. There were more than enough for us to show our struggle to the outside world. Although we could not see the sun and the children playing we knew they were there and that they were shining because they were happy to take part in the creation of a new world.

A day in our program was always full of dialogue and discussion about themes that were significant to them as women at Natureza settlement. These themes emerged through the dialogue my participants engaged with each other. Dialogue was a major role in the development and implementation of our literacy project. Dialogue also helped us generate themes that were meaningful to our group. These generative themes were “selected from the learners’ own vocabulary, words that embody the challenges that the learners confront every day, with the potential to spark viable discussion around the core issues” (Freire,

1985, p. 22). Therefore, our generative themes were constructed from the dialogue that took place in our classes.

My participants always talked to each other about topics that were relevant to advance the discussion of gender and the development of the literacy program. After they agreed on a theme to discuss, our dialogues evolved around this theme. These generative themes helped us come up with words that Freire called “generative words.” The generative words embodied my participants’ social, political and cultural reality (Freire, 1993). As the words were generated, I wrote them on the board so my learners could see how a given word was written according to the standard of the Portuguese language. Words such as *struggle*, *change*, *gender*, *oppression*, *patriarchy*, *love*, *compassion*, *world*, *politics*, *agrarian*, and *reform* were among the words that emerged during our discussions. I remember it was fascinating to look into my participants’ eyes and see how happy they were about being able to come up with words that were meaningful to them. At the end of our class meeting, I invited my participants to write a paragraph or two using the generative words that they had come up with during the class and advance, in writing, the theme we had discussed in class.

Since our literacy project focused on advancing the discussion about gender at Natureza settlement, our generative themes evolved around women’s issues, gender oppression, and oppression at all levels. The discussion of these themes always started with women talking about their lives at Natureza settlement and the MST itself.

Ica, Patricia, Julia, and Preta were not illiterate, but they wanted to improve their literacy skills<sup>7</sup> and advance the discussion about gender at Natureza settlement. Our literacy program gave my participants the chance to become better conscientized<sup>8</sup>. As Julia once said “I have never thought that gender was so important.” The conscientization process we were engaged in empowered my participants to reflect upon their lives and also to be agents of transformation in their communities.

In the next section, I discuss how the conscientization process helped my participants to decide on a program that would be meaningful to them.

### **“This is the literacy program we want:”**

#### **In the Voice of Ica, Patricia, Julia and Preta**

In this section, I discuss how conscientization helped my participants’ define and implement a literacy program that would be meaningful to them. I chose to lay down my data analysis using my participants’ voices and views on

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<sup>7</sup>In this study, literacy skills should be understood not only as the ability to codify graphic symbols but also with the notion that in acquiring literacy, subjects are also able to read and transform the world. I would also like to clarify that my study proposed to find out how women in the Brazilian landless movement would use the ideas of Paulo Freire to develop a program that would be meaningful to them. In being so, I will not discuss whether my participants improved their writing and reading skills during the time I conducted my study because this was not what I proposed to do.

<sup>8</sup>Word used by Paulo Freire to explain the process in which subjects engage in dialogue with each other and become part of the process of naming and transforming the world.

how they saw themselves participating in such a program as an attempt to help my readers understand better how they saw themselves acquiring literacy.

**Ica: “Becoming literate is to learn how to interpret the world”**

When our classes started I noticed that my participants were not sure what to expect. They have had literacy programs in the settlement before and all these programs; unfortunately, did not continue either due to lack of Federal financial support or to the lack of participants' interest. The latter did not apply to Ica during the development and implementation of my study. She was always very eager to learn and to participate. I still remember Ica's enthusiasm about coming to the board and writing the sentences she had formed with the generative words. She was so enthusiastic about the classes that during one of my visits to the settlement, her husband told me that she had an argument with him because her notebook was missing. He told me that she loved my classes.

Ica was always on time. She never missed one class and always had a lot of questions for me. She barely finished fifth grade, as I mentioned in Chapter 3, but her writing skills were exceptional. For Ica, to acquire literacy was “to learn how to interpret the world. It is to learn how to put our thoughts together and write them on a piece of paper.” She always told me that she loved writing about things that were important to her and to the movement.

It was fascinating to see Ica's definition of literacy. Her definition perfectly connected with Freire's ideas to literacy education. Ica was not interested in learning how to codify graphic symbols *per se*; she wanted to interpret the world.

And in interpreting the world, she expected to find ways to transform it. I sensed that our literacy classes were helping Ica to come up with ideas on how she would go about transforming her world as a woman at Natureza settlement.

In transforming her world, Ica wanted to re-discover herself as a woman in the settlement. I remember that in one conversation I had with her in a chilly morning at Natureza, she mentioned that learning how to write and read can make us “reflect upon our reality; it also makes us reflect upon everything we have experienced and everything we dream about experiencing.” This idea of dreaming about experiencing seems to be connected with the idea of challenging herself to do things differently and Ica wanted to change as a woman.

Since I arrived at Natureza settlement, I noticed that Ica was eager to participate in the program and invite as many people and she could to participate. She told me once that they needed to improve their literacy skills and to discuss gender and that “the program would help them a lot because we are the ones who are putting it together according to our needs.”

Ica was always proud of being part of the development and implementation of the program. During my visits to the settlement, Ica always asked her husband to take of their kids when we had classes so she did not miss our discussions. In class, Ica was courteous and talkative. She always encouraged other learners who were shy and afraid to speak. Ica used to say that “it is very important for us to become literate and able to understand our world and we cannot be afraid to make our voices heard, we are all here to learn.”

Ica always made sure to remind them that the classes were supposed to attend to their needs and that they could change whatever they wanted at anytime they desired.

My first reaction to Ica's words was a surprise to me. At first, I was not comfortable with the idea that my students were almost in complete control of the classes. I felt like they were ignoring my role as an educator. One afternoon after our class was over, I decided to go for a walk in the woods and reflect upon all the bitter feelings that suddenly I had to deal with. I was lost and embarrassed for having all those feelings, feelings that clearly conflicted with the kind of person I thought I was. I wanted to be recognized for the hard work I was putting in the development and implementation of the program and I thought that the least they could do was to recognize my role as a teacher and praise me for that.

Reflecting upon my role as an educator, I realized that Ica's intention was not to leave me out of the program but to make sure that what I planned to develop and implement was indeed working. When she told the students that they could change anything they wanted, she was actually recognizing my role as an educator because this was what I was proposing. It is fascinating to see how attached we are to traditional ways of teaching where educators have to be in control of their classes at all times. This experience reminded me that I am also a product of society and that there will be times that I will have to reflect upon my role as an educator in order to understand where I came from and where I want to go as an educator. As Merriam (2002) so well elucidates, one of the goals of a

feminist methodology to qualitative studies is to free ourselves from “ assumptions that structure and limit our ways of thinking and being in the world” (p. 9). And my study helped me understand that it is important to reflect upon our lives as educators if we want to free ourselves from traditional ways of teaching that perpetuate relations of power.

Before conducting this study with the women in the MST was not enabled understand that I am also attached to traditional ways of teaching that went against everything I believed and above all with the study I was conducting. In reflecting upon my life as an educator, I was able to understand myself better as a whole human being. This process enabled me to perceive all the parts that make me a human being.

Developing and implementing a literacy program, for Ica, had to be done with and for everybody. When one student missed class, Ica was sad and wanted to know why that student was absent. Since the first day I arrived at Natureza, Ica started to engage in dialogue with other women and me in order to find out what kind of literacy program would best attend to the needs of the settlement. She used to say that “we need to find a way to make other people participate in our program, in our struggle against gender oppression at Natureza.” The dialogic approach not only helped her to decide on the best literacy program for Natureza settlement but also helped her become conscientized about how she, as a woman, could help design a program that would advance the discussion on gender in the settlement.

In addition, Ica's views about developing a literacy program as such helped people to discuss women's issues more broadly at Natureza settlement. I vividly remember Ica talking to other people in the kitchen about how wonderful it was to talk about our lives as women and "to find out that we have a lot in common." She loved to share with other women stories about her childhood and womanhood. It was like she wanted women to find out by themselves that we all have similarities and therefore, "we have to be able to develop and implement a literacy program that would attend to our needs."

The dialogue approach helped Ica become better conscientized about the world and break through prevailing forms of oppression that kept her "companheiras"<sup>9</sup> and herself oppressed at Natureza settlement. Ica wanted to keep the program alive "because this is the only way we have to keep the dialogue about gender moving forward." She was interested in improving her literacy skills but her major goal in developing and implementing the literacy program was, according to her, to improve the "dialogue in the settlement about gender issues."

Ica was not alone in her search to start a dialogue about gender issues in the settlement. Her "companheiras" were also interested in these issues and supported her views. In the next section, I discuss Patricia's views about literacy and how these views contributed to the program we developed.

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<sup>9</sup>The word "companheiras" means *comrade* in English, and women in the MST widely use it to refer to each other.



**Patricia: “For me literacy is everything, it’s to understand our reality”**

My conversations with Patricia were always interesting and fun. I am not a morning person but I did not mind waking up very early in the morning to talk to her while she made cheese and cookies. I still can feel the taste of her cookies in my mouth. Our conversations usually started by us sharing our childhood memories and how these memories are important to us and also contributed to the construction of our identity.

Patricia explained to me that she was going through some changes after her divorce. I could perfectly connect with her since I am also divorced and therefore understand easily the kind of changes she was facing. Patricia had an amazing sense of humor and everybody seems to love her. She was never afraid to make mistakes and when she did, she made fun of herself. Patricia was always eager to help others.

In our first literacy class meetings, Patricia tried to call the group’s attention for the need to continue the literacy program after I left. I sensed that she wanted to hold on to the opportunity my study was giving them and she would do “everything” she could not to let the program disband after I left the settlement. Literacy for Patricia was “everything” and she refused to let go of her dream to continue the program.

During one of our conversations in the kitchen, Patricia told me that she was concerned “about the future of the literacy program after you leave. We have

to find a way to keep the group alive. Literacy and the discussion of gender are very important.”

Viewing literacy as “everything,” Patricia believed that we had to work hard to bring as many people as we could to our meetings. She believed that in acquiring literacy “we understand that our society is the way it is because we made it that way and if we made it that way, we can transform it.” Patricia was a very critical person and saw the need to transform things she believed oppressed her and other people in the settlement and in society.

Patricia was a very strong woman who had dealt with different kinds of issues in life; therefore her goal in developing and implementing a literacy program was not only to become empowered but also to help others empower themselves. The fact that Patricia felt discriminated against after her divorce made her fight harder against all forms of oppression in the settlement. She believed that the literacy program would be a good way “for people to get together and discuss our reality in the settlement and in society.”

My conversations with Patricia made me realize that we had a lot in common. Like Patricia, I have faced different forms of discrimination as a Third World woman in Brazil and in the United States as well. However, the experiences of living abroad and the reverse cultural shock I always face when I return to my home country contributed to my understanding that to transform a society we need love and compassion.

Forgiving our oppressors is perhaps the hardest step we have to take in our search for liberation (Freire, 1972). Denying that we do not feel sad when we feel discriminated against is denying the nature of being human. What is at stake here is not denying our feelings but understanding how they might help us in transforming our reality. Patricia and I were able to realize that discrimination can prevent us from constructing a new society and that we have to work towards making people understand that.

In dealing with discrimination, Patricia learned how to forgive and worked towards making people understand that discrimination is constructed and in being so, it can be de-constructed. I remember Patricia's words in one warm afternoon during the month of March when she said that "we are all human beings and we need to understand that we are all products of a society and we need to learn how to forgive if we want to create a better world."

The literacy program for Patricia had to help people de-construct forms of knowledge that make discrimination of all forms to emerge. In being so, the literacy program that she was helping to develop and implement had to use their realities as the starting point and it had "to show us our realities because when we understand our realities we look for other ways of living."

The conscientization process not only helped Patricia to understand her reality but also it made her see the need to help others to understand how society was constructed. She did not believe that she would be able to transform society alone. For her, the de-construction and construction of society had to be a

struggle where people could work together as a community. Natureza settlement as a community and therefore the literacy program had “to attend to the needs of my community” as Patricia said. The literacy program had to be able to help people understand their reality and transform it.

**Julia: “Literacy helps me participate in the discussions and make decisions”**

For me, the hardest part of writing a dissertation is not the time you spent at your computer trying to put your thoughts together. In my opinion, the hardest part is to make sense of our participants’ worlds. Every sentence I write about each of my participants reminds me of them and I struggle to make my analysis as just as I can.

If I could I would go back to Natureza settlement and write my dissertation there. I would share each page I wrote with my participants in order to find out if my eyes were interpreting their worlds accurately. However, this is financially, geographically, and humanly impossible; therefore I will have to believe that our dialogue helped me make sense of their realities. In believing this, I now make sense of Julia’s words and interpret her views on literacy and how the conscientization process helped her develop and implement the literacy program at Natureza settlement.

Interpreting Julia’s world reminds me of her smile and her willingness to help me. She always made sure that I was well fed and happy. Julia was caring and understanding. I still remember seeing Julia running around and looking for

some herbs to make me some tea when I had an awful stomach ache. There were times that I cried and hated the world that had treated and was treating people like Julia badly and unjustly. I felt lost. How could I love and hate the same world I lived in? In the midst of this storm of feelings, Julia would come to my rescue and tell me stories about her life and how happy she was living at Natureza settlement.

During one of our dialogues, Julia told me that they all have changed considerably participating in the MST. She told me that five years ago “we were living in a tent and now we have our land.” I could sense her sadness whenever she mentioned the time they spent living in tents before they occupied the land. Her words helped me understand that the process we engage when carrying out a study or participating in a social movement had to be accounted for. She always had the right words and stories to tell accordingly to the way I was feeling. Julia used to say that “we learned a lot participating in the movement but we still have long ways to go. The important thing is not to forget that change is a process and the struggle should never end.”

Julia helped me understand that changing the world is a process and it is within this process that dialogue will take place and hopefully help people understand the need to construct a more just and democratic society for all human beings.

In our first meetings, Julia was shy and did not participate actively. At first, I did not know whether she was happy participating in the development and

implementation of our program or not. Then, I understood that that was Julia's own way of collaborating. She loved listening and she was happy to be there.

For Julia, literacy was important because she wanted to participate in the discussions and in the decision making process at Natureza settlement. I remember Julia's words one cold afternoon over *chimarrão* when she said "I want to become literate so I can participate more in our meetings and make my voice heard." She believed that learning how to write and read would help her make her voice heard. Like Patricia, Julia believed that we needed to have as many people as we could participating in our discussions. She believed that acquiring literacy was a process and that they had to work together with "the ones who know more helping the ones who do not know much."

The more time I spent at Natureza, the more I realized that my participants were not interested in changing their realities by themselves. It seemed that the process they would be engaged in during their search for transformation was more important. The literacy program, however, had to attend to the way they perceived themselves as a group. Julia mentioned that they "lived as a group at Natureza and so we have to develop programs that would attend to the needs of everybody."

I still remember the day that Julia told me that she was happy we were developing a literacy program and that the dialogue we were engaging in helped her see the need for the settlement to address gender issues. However, she did not believe that women could reverse this situation working alone. Julia believed

that men had to participate in the discussion as well if they wanted to advance “the discussion of gender in the settlement.”

Like Ica and Patricia, Julia’s views about literacy reflected the MST’s philosophy in which they believe that nobody should be left behind in their search for transformation. The fact that the MST was not addressing gender issues as it should be has to be historically contextualized in that the movement emerged within a patriarchal society in which structures of power were also present. Denying history was denying the very essence of who they were.

For Julia, there was a need for them to understand that human beings construct their identities as they write their histories. However, if they wanted to re-write their histories and create a society less inhumane, women and men had “to work together and respect each other.” In being so, a literacy program would only attend to Julia’s needs if it could attend to the needs of the entire settlement because “we live and work as a group here.”

**Preta: “For me, acquiring literacy is to participate in the construction of the world”**

I cannot write about Preta without thinking about all the conversations we had about the world and ourselves while we drank *chimarrão*. Every morning during my visits to the settlement, Preta would wait for me to wake up so we could sit and talk under the shade of a tree in front of her house. Sometimes, in the winter, we sat and ate tangerines and oranges while we enjoyed the sun. This reminded of my childhood in my hometown.

If I close my eyes, I still can smell the flowers Preta had in her garden and the taste of those tangerines and oranges. It was like those fruits had a certain taste I could not explain; if freedom had a taste, I would say they tasted of “freedom.” In other words, those fruits also had a history, a history free of transnational companies and pesticides. Perhaps Preta contributed to my fertile imagination in that she loved to tell me stories about how they had started their garden. Preta used to say that “I am happy I am eating a real fruit and not a piece of Monsanto”<sup>10</sup> and so was I.

From the moment I arrived at Natureza settlement, I noticed that Preta was interested in helping in the development and implementation of a literacy program that could attend to her needs and the needs of the settlement. Preta was able to read and write well since she finished eighth grade and had the opportunity to participate in positions of leadership in the MST where she read literature from a variety of fields. In addition, she was successful in reading relations of power that kept her “companheiras and companheiros” oppressed.

The more I talked to Preta the more I convinced myself that there is a major difference between schooling and education. I doubt that all eighth-graders in Brazil have the same knowledge she does about the world. I wish they did. Preta did not have a lot of opportunities for schooling in that she lived in poverty and attending school was not a priority. However, Preta took advantage of the

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<sup>10</sup>Monsanto is a transnational company that controls half the seed market in Brazil. The MST strives to keep their farms and gardens free of Monsanto products.



“school of life” and learned from her experiences. She learned how to interpret her world while participating in the MST.

Unfortunately, many Brazilian schools are not a reflection of society. There are still some Brazilian educators who believe that schools should be totally separate from social, economic, cultural, and religious issues. Mistakenly, these educators lack the understanding that schooling in order to be transformative needs to address the learners’ realities. Schooling should not be a place where a one-way communication takes place and knowledge and power are disconnected (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983; and Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Preta was aware that in order for our literacy program to attend to the needs of the settlement, we had to work with people’s histories and understand how these histories contributed to the construction of their identities. She understood gender as being historically constructed and therefore “we can de-construct relations that keep us oppressed.” The literacy process that my study proposed to develop and implement, according to Preta, “had to be open to everybody because the dialogue that will emerge during our meetings will help us break down structures of power in the settlement.”

It was fascinating to listen to how Preta was successful in providing arguments to prove her point of view. She always had an example to give or a story to tell about how the reading of the world has helped her to become the woman she is. I remember a story that Preta told me once about her participation in a position of leadership in the MST. She said that “at the beginning I was

scared and afraid that I would be able to speak in front a group of people. I was afraid that I would not be able to make myself understood but I decided to keep moving and then realized that it is in this process of talking to each other that we change our world.”

Preta’s reading of her world contributed to her views on the literacy program she wanted for the settlement. According to her, “no program would attend to her needs if it did not attend to the needs of the settlement as well.”

The development and implementation of the literacy program according to Preta, helped her “to find ways to start putting into practice everything I believed in.” In other words, Preta believed that it was time for her to start taking action to change her world. I sensed Preta wanted to link her theory with her practice and move a step towards the construction of the society she believed in. This step is a significant piece of a Freirean-inspired literacy program and therefore I address it in my next section.

### **Practicing Theory and Theorizing Practice:**

#### **“We Can Make a Difference”**

Developing a liberatory literacy program is not an easy task. Usually what we see is the development of programs that only propose to improve the learners’ literacy and critical skills. In my opinion, if we propose to develop a transformative program we have to address the notion of taking action (Freire, 1972). Liberation is a process that usually occurs when dialogue takes place,

when people become “conscientized,” and when people, in reading their worlds, link theory with practice and vice-versa and act upon transforming their realities.

During the development of my study, I noticed that the feminist methodology and the Freirean-inspired literacy program were giving my participants the chance to take control of their worlds as landless women.

In one of our meetings, Ica raised her hand and said that it was time for us “to think about how we could change things we do not agree with in the settlement.” I was relieved to listen to Ica’s suggestion because I did not want to be the person to tell them they need to take action. Actually, this would be inappropriate to my study since I was not proposing to change their worlds. What I hoped for developing this study was to give my participants the chance to change their own realities.

One of the major problems I see in developing a transformative literacy program is that most of the times, we do not move forward and take action that would help us in our search for transformation. Perhaps because we mistakenly think that we need to start with major chances. I personally believe that if we want to transform the world, we have to start in our corner of the world.

Patricia seemed to understand that transformation had to come from within. I remember the day she proudly said that she was not happy in her marriage and she decided to file for a divorce. For Patricia, this was a major change because she knew she would be discriminated against, but she decided to face whatever “would come to my way and be happy.” Patricia also believed

that “we need to educate our kids about gender issues. We need to start changing relations of gender in our family.” Patricia mentioned that “I know this is hard but if we really believe in what we are discussing here, we have to put this into practice.”

Envisioning change, my participants started to practice their theory. During our discussions, I noted that all my participants believed that gender was important and had to be addressed at Natureza. They all believed that gender was a form of oppression that kept them oppressed and prevented the movement to advance and construct a new society. They also believed that women and men had to address gender together and that the literacy program could help them do this.

After Ica’s suggestion, my participants engaged in dialogue about how they could take action and start making change at Natureza. Julia liked Patricia’s ideas of addressing gender issues in the family. She said that after she started participating in the development and implementation of our literacy program “she started questioning gender roles at home.” She mentioned that she did not think it was right for her “to cook dinner alone while her daughter and husband watched TV or did something else.” Julia also said that “if other men in the settlement saw her husband cooking and doing house chores they would laugh but then hopefully with time they would understand that that was all right and would see such an act as part of their daily routine in the settlement.”

Julia's comments were interesting and I asked her if she was willing to start putting into practice her idea and she smiled timidly and said "I already did last night." Everybody laughed and wanted to know how her husband responded to the idea of cooking and doing house chores. Julia's face turned red but she said that she wanted to start "doing something different and that was the way I found." After Julia described her experience, everybody praised her for her braveness to take action to change her life and lives of other people in the settlement.

Preta also believed that they had to start changing the way that gender roles and expectations were structured at Natureza. She once told me that she was struggling to make her children understand that they had to share the house chores. The time I spent at Preta's house when I visited the settlement gave me the opportunity to observe how gender roles still existed in her family. Preta knew it and shared her concerns with me during my stay at her house. She mentioned that it was really "hard to make children, specially boys, understand that they have to do the house chores as well." Fortunately, Preta was a very strong woman who had decided to make a change and she said that she would "do whatever I can to raise my kids differently."

After talking to Preta about her views about gender roles and dialoguing with her about her ideas for change, I felt really sad. At first, I did not know why and struggled to understand my feelings. Then, I realized I doubted my participants' intention. I was not sure they wanted to change or they were telling me they wanted just to make me happy and perhaps to write a wonderful

dissertation about issues of relations and power at Natureza. I felt embarrassed for doubting their intentions. I felt embarrassed because I have questioned gender roles in my family for a long period of time and have not taken action to change them. Deep inside, I was jealous of them. But how could I be jealous of something I always believed in? How could I be jealous of seeing people taking action to change their worlds? I then understood I could and that this was perfectly normal because I am human.

In understanding that I am also human and capable of having ambivalent feelings, I reflected upon my role as a daughter, sister, aunt, cousin, and friend. I reflected upon my role as a woman in my family and society and realized that there are still many things I have not done. I still have long ways to go regarding putting everything I believe into practice. I learned that during the development of a research study, researchers have to acknowledge their feelings and reflect upon them because they are also part of the process. During my stay at Natureza and in Brazil, I had a storm of feelings popping up every day. I tried to reflect upon them all because I am thankful for having done that because this reflection helped me understand myself better as a human being.

The taking action process usually occurs when people engage in dialogue and become conscientized about their world. I was glad that my study was helping my participants to reflect upon their practices and change their lives to fit their beliefs. In doing this, they were practicing theory and theorizing practice.

Ica, for instance, always reflected upon her role as a mother and wife. She used to call our attention to the need for us to be “faithful to what we believe in.” Once she told us during one of our meetings that she also wanted to address gender issues in her family and that “gender roles exist and we need to talk about how these roles prevent us from advancing gender equality in society.” Ica seemed eager to do whatever she could to change gender relations in the settlement. And she did.

It was during a beautiful winter afternoon that Ica entered the room carrying her notebook and holding her daughter’s hand. She asked me if I had a notebook her daughter could write on. Her daughter’s words brought tears into my eyes. She said “my mom wants me to be here to learn about Freire and boys and girls.” Everybody laughed and Esperança<sup>11</sup> laughed as well. Esperança was five years old and I am sure she did not know why we were laughing and why she was there.

For Ica, her daughter was a symbol of change and hope. Bringing her daughter to our meetings so she could listen to what we had to say was a way she found to take action towards ending gender discrimination in the settlement. She wanted her children to grow up in a different society where “women and men are treated equally.” She was decided to make a difference. There were times

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<sup>11</sup>Esperança is the name I chose to refer to Ica’s daughter. Esperança means *hope* in English and that little girl was a symbol of change and hope for Ica and for the settlement.

that Ica brought her little boys to attend the meetings and others in which she brought her husband along.

In practicing her theory, Ica was also theorizing her practice and trying to make sense of how she would take action to change her world. Like Ica, my other three participants seemed to be actively engaged in the idea of making a difference. They wanted to construct a new form of society and they decided to start in their corner of the world. They needed to start addressing issues that were meaningful to their community and acting accordingly to what they believed in.

The notion of linking theory with practice and vice versa offers researchers and researched the opportunity “to discover alternative path for social and self-development” (Shor & Pari, 1999, p. 1). In discovering new alternatives that could help them dismantle forms of oppressions, my participants were able to understand that knowledge is constructed in their interaction with the world. As Bogdan & Biklen (1992) pointed out people can “change and grow as they learn more about themselves” (p. 37).

A central characteristic of feminist methodology and Freire’s ideas to literacy is to help individuals learn about themselves in relation to the context in which they are placed. My study helped my participants to start changing from within and moving towards working on major transformations in the settlement. Ica understood that it would not be possible for them to start suggesting major changes in the settlement because not all people at Natureza were aware about



relations of power and gender discrimination and inequality in their context.

Therefore, she decided “to start small and go from there.”

My participants’ decision to start addressing changes in their corner of the world was also an alternative they found to help their communities. As Patricia once stated, “we have to start changing ourselves so we also set the example to others.” Patricia’s elucidation shows us her commitment to her community.

Although she was committed to bring change into her life, Patricia never forgot she had a commitment to Natureza settlement. She mentioned during one of our conversations that “we have a history in the MST and this history will always be part of us.”

Patricia, Ica, Julia, and Preta always believed that the history they shared as being landless shaped their views about the world. These views, as I discussed previously in Chapter 3, also contributed to the development and implementation of a literacy program that would attend to their needs. In preserving their history with the MST, my participants constructed her identities and discovered alternatives for change that were meaningful to them as a community.

The development and implementation of the literacy program I proposed helped my participants to reflect upon their lives as sites for change. The approach I adopted gave my participants the chance to choose a program that would best fit their needs. The dialogue we engaged in, the conscientization process that my participants and I went through, and the steps we took towards

taking action to change our realities, all happened when we reflected upon our worlds and shared our experiences with each other.

The process of sharing our experiences with each other contributed to my participants' desire to move forward and develop a set of materials they could share with other people at Natureza and also share with other MST settlements nearby. As Patricia pointed out, "it would be good if we could share with other people what we did here." The other participants agreed and were excited about the idea of developing materials.

In the next section, I discuss the development of a brochure in which my participants described our literacy program. I also discuss a set of fundamentals about gender equality and gender roles they put together and wanted to see addressed in the settlement's monthly meetings.

### **Developing Materials: The Taking Action Process**

When I arrived at Natureza settlement, I was not concerned about the end product of my study. I was not searching for concrete findings that would help me explain how women in the Brazilian landless movement would use Freire's ideas to develop a literacy program that could attend to their needs. Nor was I interested in proving that adopting a feminist framework to my study could change the lives of my participants. But I was interested in the dialogic process that my participants and I would engage during the study. In this process, I hoped to come to an understanding of how Freire's ideas (and method) and a feminist methodology could help women make sense of their realities and in making

sense of these realities how they would develop a literacy program that would attend to their needs. In addition to this, I was interested how this study would help me understand myself better as a Third World woman.

Not surprisingly, the outcomes of my study were more fascinating than I had expected. This did not come as a surprise to me because I was perfectly aware of the web of wonders I involved myself in when I chose to conduct a study in which I proposed to intersect a feminist approach to research with the theory of oppression and method that Paulo Freire developed in the 1960s.

The feminist approach I adopted gave my participants the chance to reflect upon their lives as women and understand how gender inequality was preventing them from constructing a more democratic and just society the movement strongly believes in. The Freirean method, on the other hand, helped my participants to understand that a literacy program would only fit their needs if it worked with their realities. Also, this literacy program had to help them take action and change realities that they found to be oppressive.

These two frameworks played a major role in the development of my study and also helped my participants in the development of materials that were intended to help others in their search for making sense of their realities.

### **The Brochure: Sharing Our Work**

Winter in Rio Grande do Sul can be harsh, especially in the middle of June, but the sun was bright and shiny the day we started developing our brochure. The idea of having a brochure started when Ica mentioned that it would be good

“to let other people in the settlement who are not participating in our classes know about we are doing.” Patricia greatly supported Ica’s suggestion and added that the brochure could also inform other MST’s settlements nearby about the literacy program they were developing. The brochure was a way my participants found to show their struggle to the outside world, the world outside our classroom. For me, it was also a way they found to empower other people about the need to become critically literate and understand that gender plays an significant role in the struggle for land as well.

Initially, we decided on how we wanted the brochure<sup>12</sup> (see Appendix B) to look like. They all agreed they wanted to have a picture that represented the MST and also something that could represent our literacy group. They, then, decided to have a picture of an open book with the female and male symbol intersecting and in this intersection they wanted to write “MST.”

The picture they chose for the brochure’s cover represented perfectly the literacy program they developed. Ica told us that her husband was a good artist and she could ask him to draw our picture. The other participants agreed and we had Ica’s husband drawing our picture. He was indeed a very good artist and drew a wonderful picture for our brochure. Ica was happy to see her husband helping us with the development of materials. This was exactly what she always wanted to see in the settlement, families working together to dismantle oppressive

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<sup>12</sup>Appendix B contains the English version of the brochure.

structures that keep the movement from advancing democracy at all levels in society.

After the picture was done, they wanted a title that could represent the picture and the literacy program. We brainstormed for a while and then Patricia said: "Our History of Relations: Our Relations that Make History."<sup>13</sup>

They thought the title that Patricia chose represented the literacy program and gender discussion at Natureza settlement.

After agreeing on a picture and title, my participants' next step was to decide what they wanted to say about the literacy program they were developing and implementing. They decided that first they wanted to inform other people about their history and where they came from and how the group was organized. They also wanted to inform people about the goals of the group and their challenges for the future. In addition, they wanted to add a section where they could discuss alternatives for action and lay down some ideas they had for reflection. In this section, they proposed two meetings to discuss gender issues, one at Natureza and another at a settlement nearby. They also wanted to make sure their names were printed on the brochure so people would know who had developed and implemented the literacy program at Natureza settlement.

It took us two days to develop this brochure. My participants were excited about developing materials on their own. I could see on their faces a feeling of

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<sup>13</sup>Translating into Portuguese: *Nossa História de Relações: Nossas Relações que Fazem História.*

accomplishment. We agreed that after they wrote the texts for each section of the brochure, they would write the texts on the board and we, as a group, would check them for mistakes. I was impressed with the well-articulated texts they produced. They needed some help with grammar and organization, but I could perfectly understand the ideas the texts conveyed.

As a critical educator committed to world transformation, I understand that writing happens in the dialogic process that learners engage in with each other. But I also believe that “because of the political problem of power, you need to learn how to command the dominant language, in order for you to survive in the struggle to transform society” (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 73). When I saw that my participants’ texts had grammar problems I did not know how to tell them that. I was concerned about offending them. I thought about adopting a traditional model of teaching and point out to them the mistakes they had made. But this would not be appropriate to my study and to the way I perceive myself as an educator.

In the middle of my search for a better way to approach my participants regarding grammar mistakes, Ica said “I believe our texts are good but we need help.” I knew they needed help but I did not know how to help them. Patricia, then, looked at me and said “can you help us with that?” I said, “Yes” and asked Patricia to come to the board and circle all the words and sentences she thought were not acceptable in the dominant language. After Patricia was finished, the

other participants wanted to come to the board and help too. I helped them when they were unsure about what to do and asked specific grammar questions.

Developing the brochure with my participants gave me the chance to reflect upon my life as a woman, but also it gave me the opportunity to reflect upon my role as an educator. Like my participants, my study helped me link my theory with my practice. In this reflexivity process, I was frustrated when I did not know what to do. Then, I realized it is more important to acknowledge that we need to change than the act of change itself. In my view, change is a process, not a product. If we consider change a product, we lose all the reflexivity process we engaged in to acknowledge that change is part of our struggle for liberation.

My participants wanted the brochure to represent the project they were developing and implementing. They were even careful in selecting the color of the paper the brochure would be copied on. They suggested red because it represented the colors of the MST flag. Unfortunately, the brochure had to be printed on white paper because the prints would be hard to be read on red paper.

We printed out 50 copies; out of these 50 copies, 25 were distributed to families at Natureza during my last visit to the settlement in July 2003. The remaining copies would be distributed when they visited a nearby settlement later that month.

I have developed materials for social change before but this experience has been both rewarding and fascinating. I have never felt in a perfect balance with myself like this before. I probably felt this way because this was the first time

I had the opportunity to reflect upon my life as a woman, researcher, educator, and activist. I had the opportunity to integrate all the parts of who I am and what makes me a human being. And in this process, I realize that the struggle goes on and that to be in a perfect balance with myself I will always have to integrate all the parts of who I am.

Following, I will discuss the development of a set of fundamentals that my participants put together regarding gender roles and women's issues at Natureza settlement. Their goal in working on these fundamentals was to propose significant changes regarding gender at Natureza settlement.

### **The Fundamentals: “The Changes We Want to Make”**

It was during my last visit to Natureza settlement that my participants decided to start working on what they called “The Fundamentals of our History of Gender in the Settlement.”<sup>14</sup> Patricia mentioned that they would like to do this so “we can have something concrete to work on after you leave.” I sensed they did not know how to start. I am sure if somebody asked me to put together a set of fundamentals about my life and lay down things I wanted to see changed, I would have a hard time starting. Mistakenly, we usually start from the major changes we want to address. I had an idea of the things that my participants wanted to change at Natureza but I did not want to be the one to tell them what to do.

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<sup>14</sup>Translating into Portuguese: *Os Fundamentos da Nossa História de Gênero no Assentamento*.



While I waited for them to read their worlds, I read mine. I thought about things I wanted to change in my life. I thought about things I sometimes do and am ashamed of things such as having stereotypes about other cultures and groups of people, discriminating against people based on their national origin, and so on. These were things I was not proud of and wanted to change. I was so involved in reflecting upon my life that I forgot my participants were struggling to put together a set of fundamentals that could make sense to Natureza settlement and to them. I then heard Ica say, “we should write down everything we do not like seeing regarding women’s issues at Natureza.”

After Ica’s suggestion, starting was easy. They knew exactly what bothered them at Natureza. They thought about their lives as women and what they wanted to change at Natureza settlement. It was interesting to note that they came up with similar things they wanted to address and change. Below is the final set of fundamentals that my participants put together and wanted to see addressed in the future monthly meetings at Natureza.

- ❖ Discussion about gender in the family, settlement, and movement;
- ❖ Share house chores and teach children and youth about gender issues;
- ❖ Have equal number of women and men cleaning the kitchen, office, and the conference room;
- ❖ Have equal number of women and men participating in the decision making process in the cooperatives, settlements, and in all MST committees;

- ❖ Have equal number of women and men participating in social activities in the settlement;
- ❖ Share all the daily work equally among women and men at Natureza settlement.

I kept the order they laid down the fundamentals and I was also very careful in translating their words into English. In the process of organizing the fundamentals so they could make sense to other people at Natureza and in the MST, Ica said that “we should write the word *women* first” since women have been left out of the discussion for a long time.

For me, Ica's comment was feminist in nature since she was engaged in the struggle for women's liberation. However, as I discussed in Chapter 3, the word “feminism” had a negative connotation to all my participants and they rarely referred to it besides to say that they did not want to be labeled “feminists.”

My participants believed that “machismo” had contributed to leave women's issues out of the discussions in the settlement and in the movement and “feminism” would also perpetuate a cycle of oppression that they did not want to see. They believed that feminists were men-haters and hatred was a feeling they rejected in their search for liberation.

Interestingly enough, my views were totally different from them. However, my study proposed to enter their worlds as a traveler and in doing so, it was not my intention to give them a label they believed to be oppressive. Human beings name their oppression according to the context they live. I had the privilege to

live in two different contexts that contributed to the construction of my identity. I do not reject the label “feminist” because feminism plays an important role in my life and I do not equate feminism with man-hating. My participants and I did not share the same histories and identities and consequently, differences would arise between us.

In the search for liberation, women have to find similarities that can bring us together and help us break down prevailing forms of oppression in our contexts. My participants were engaged in breaking structures of power at Natureza settlement that I believed were oppressive and were keeping the movement to advance democracy. Besides, the dialogue we engaged with each other helped me reflect upon my life and this is something I highly value.

The set of fundaments they put together represented their world at Natureza settlement. Ica, Patricia, Julia, and Preta were able to interpret their world and develop materials that were meaningful to them. The dialogic approach they engaged in led them to become conscientized about their realities and to take action to change these realities.

The feminist framework and the Freirean method and ideas enabled my participants to use their lives as sites for change. Through dialogue, they advanced the discussion on gender and realized that the discussion of such an issue was highly important for the advancement of democracy inside the settlement. My participants also acknowledged that change comes within and

that if they desired to change things at Natureza, they had first to look for alternatives to change themselves.

Ica, Patricia, Julia, and Preta's decision to start addressing gender issues in the family represented a significant step towards working with major changes at Natureza. They acknowledged that they had to reflect upon their praxis and consequently, act upon changing their contexts to fit their needs as women and the needs of the settlement as well. Therefore, change for my participants was a process. In engaging in this process, they were able to share stories that were meaningful to them as a group. They were able to share stories that greatly contributed to the construction of their identities as landless women. These stories helped them understand that gender is socially constructed, and since it is socially constructed, it can be de-constructed.

In the process of de-constructing and constructing gender, my participants contributed to the advancement of gender discussion at Natureza, which hopefully will contribute to the advancement of democracy in the MST and in the long run, in Brazil as well. In addition, this process also enabled me to reflect upon my life and de-construct prevailing forms of oppression which I believe contribute to keep me oppressed as a woman and as a citizen in my own country.

The stories and experiences that my participants and I shared were fascinating. They gave us the opportunity to understand better the essence of what it is to be a human being, which helped us move forward in our liberatory process and create alternatives that made sense to our world and ourselves.

Besides, this study gave us the opportunity to engage in dialogue, which according to feminist scholars and Paulo Freire is the first step towards the transformation of the world.

## CHAPTER 5: REFLECTIONS

In this Chapter, I reflect about the study I conducted at Natureza settlement and how it helped my participants and me to reflect upon our lives as women. I also reflect on how the feminist framework I adopted for this study contributed to the development and implementation of the Freirean-inspired literacy program my study proposed to start.

My experience of living, researching, and dialoguing with my participants at Natureza settlement will never be forgotten. The research study I conducted meant much more to me than a requirement that I had to meet to be awarded a doctoral degree. As Krieger (1991) so well explains “our studies are reflections of our inner lives” (p. 1). The study I conducted was part of my life and thus, it enabled me to put into practice theories and methods I believe can be of great significance in the process of interpreting and transforming the world and ourselves.

Living between two cultures for over ten years has played a major role in defining me as a feminist researcher and educator. The dialogue I engaged in with my peers contributed to the construction of my self and identity. However, I kept the essence of what, in my view, it is like to be a human being. Also, I kept my commitment to social change and to the transformation of a country I will always feel proud to call home. Thus, my study was a way I found to give something back to my country.

I had many things in my mind when I returned to Brazil in December 2002. Re-adjusting to the place I call home was not easy, but I learned from my fears, anxieties, dreams, and reflections. There were times that the dialogue I engaged in with my participants was my only hope that one day we would be able to have a world free of discrimination and oppression.

My decision to conduct research with women in the Brazilian landless helped me write a piece of my history in my home country. In the early stages of the development of my study, I was unsure of how my participants would be able to adapt the ideas of the Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire and feminist theories to develop a literacy program that could attend to their needs at Natureza settlement. In addition, I was not sure how intersecting these two fields would help me reflect upon my role as a feminist researcher, an educator, and an activist.

Since the beginning of my study, I realized that the dialogic process that I engaged in with my participants would play a major role in the way I would theorize the lives of the women at Natureza settlement. When I proposed to conduct my study with women in the Brazilian landless movement, I did not intend to propose a false sisterhood (hooks, 1997). I acknowledged that we lived in different contexts and consequently we were not commonly oppressed. Also, I acknowledged that I belonged to a different social class from the one to which my participants belonged. In recognizing our differences, I worked towards finding

commonalities that could bring us together as women. This reflexivity process allowed me to enter their worlds as a traveler and not a tourist.

The feminist approach I adopted as my framework gave my participants and me the opportunity to use women's lives as a site in our struggle for liberation. In using our lives as a site for change, I realized that I could not speak of my participants without speaking of myself. As Trinh (1987) beautifully states, a feminist researcher "cannot speak of them without speaking of herself, of history without involving her story, also that she cannot make a gesture without activating the to-and-fro movement of live" (p. 375).

When I first met Ica, Patricia, Julia, and Preta, I knew that in sharing our stories, we would be moving a step towards the development of a literacy program that could attend to their needs. I also knew that I would not be the same after I left Natureza settlement. Their stories and our dialogues touched my life forever.

Although my participants and I differed from each other considerably, our stories growing up as women in Brazil brought us together. We realized that independently of our social class, race, and religious and ideological beliefs we, as women, all face gender oppression in society. The feminist approach I adopted for my study, which gives women the chance to reflect upon our lives, contributed to the start of a dialogue about our realities and ourselves.

The dialogic process that we engaged in with each other was a step forward into the development of a literacy program that could attend to their



needs as landless women at Natureza settlement. This process also gave us the opportunity to become better conscientized about the world since my participants acknowledged that gender equality plays a significant part in the advancement of democracy in society.

When Paulo Freire developed his literacy program in the 1960s, he did not propose a method that could work everywhere at all times. My intention in developing this study was not to replicate Freire's program but to work with the essence of his pedagogy and method. I strongly believe that replicating Freire's method is not significant to the advancement of democracy in the MST or Brazil and, perhaps it is not elsewhere.

As a feminist researcher, I believe that methods, techniques, theories, and approaches have to be re-invented to fit different contexts. They have to be historically contextualized in order to attend to the needs of a community. My study gave my participants and me the opportunity to re-invent Freire's pedagogy in order to make it attend to our needs as women.

In my study, I acknowledged that the gender gap in the works of Paulo Freire had to be historically contextualized in order for my participants and me to be able to re-invent his pedagogy. We, as feminist researchers, cannot deny that ways of thinking change over time and that in order to make theories and methods meaningful to our contexts, they have to be re-invented.

The process that we engage in while we re-invent theories and pedagogies so they can be meaningful to us is also a significant piece of our liberation

process. My participants and I used Freire's method and pedagogy to discuss an issue that was meaningful to us as women. In discussing gender, we re-invented Freire and made his method and pedagogy attend to our needs. Using a feminist framework for my study allowed my participants and me to re-invent Freire and not discard a theory of oppression that can greatly contribute to the advancement of democracy in the MST, and consequently, in society as a whole.

Ica, Patricia, Julia, and Preta's stories and reading of the world contributed to the development of a literacy program that could fit to their needs. In reading their worlds as landless women and citizens, they de-constructed their realities and worked towards the construction "of a new world where subjects are free to make their own decisions," as Ica mentioned one day in class.

My participants were aware of the need to address gender issues at Natureza settlement. They believed that the MST could not achieve its goals of creating a democratic society if women's issues were not addressed. Our literacy program gave my participants the chance to acknowledge that they will not be able to create a democratic society if they do not break prevailing structures of power that are present in their own lives. Also, they acknowledged that transformation comes from within and that as women, they had the right to question structures of power that oppressed them.

The major goal of a feminist framework for research studies is to invite women to reflect upon their lives and understand the construction of their identities. The study I developed at Natureza gave women the chance "to talk

about issues that we usually do not discuss in the settlement,” as Julia pointed out to me during one of our conversations. Julia’s words are a good example that a feminist framework to research can, indeed, help women address issues that were considered not important by patriarchal societies.

I envision Freire’s pedagogy and method intersecting with feminist theories in that both rely on working with human beings’ experiences and using these experiences as a standpoint for liberation. I am not arguing that these two fields of study can successfully be applied to all contexts. On the contrary, what I believe is that there is a need for us, feminist researchers, to acknowledge that methods and theories have to be re-invented to fit our contexts and to attend to current needs.

As a feminist Brazilian researcher, I strongly believe that Freire’s pedagogy can be of great help to my community and therefore my intention with proposing this study was to find out how Brazilian landless women would use his ideas and method to develop a literacy program that could attend to their needs.

When I analyzed my data, I struggled not to make generalizations about women in the Brazilian landless movement. I believe that as a conscientized researcher, I have to acknowledge that there are existing cultural differences from one region to another in Brazil that might play a major role in how women read their worlds. In addition, I was careful not to impose my views on my participants since this would go against my views as a researcher. I tried as much as possible to make sense of their worlds and speak *with* them and not *for* them. In speaking

*with* them, I had the opportunity to speak of myself and make sense of my world as well.

I see the research study I conducted with the Brazilian landless women as a process. In seeing it as a process, I reject the idea that it is finished and welcome the notion that my study was the beginning of something that was meaningful to Natureza settlement and the MST. The literacy project that we developed and implemented was not an end product but the beginning of a process that can contribute to the advancement of the movement's goal of constructing "new subjects and a new world," quoting Patricia's words.

Undoubtedly, my study contributed to the advancement of gender discussion at Natureza settlement. In addition, it contributed to the way my participants saw themselves as women in the MST. It gave my participants the chance to develop materials that could help them make their voices heard as women inside and outside the settlement.

In our struggle to advance the discussion on gender at Natureza settlement, I realized, as a researcher, that all theories and methods carry ideologies that can either contribute to our search for women's liberation or prevent us from moving forward. If theories and methods do not help us to understand who we are, they are not significant to our struggle.

Freire's pedagogy and method and feminist theories were highly significant in helping my participants and me recognize that our history contributed to the construction of ourselves as women as citizens; therefore, both fields of study

were significant to our struggle for women's liberation. The feminist approach I adopted kept us moving forward as women and the Freirean method and pedagogy reminded us that there was hope and that the struggle never ends. If the Freirean method was able to raise the awareness of thousands of Brazilians in the 1960s, it was because it addressed the learners' experiences and this was also what my study did at Natureza settlement.

In quoting the words of Ica's daughter, Esperança, "I am here to learn about Freire and boys and girls," I realized that we, indeed, can learn about boys and girls and Freire if we acknowledge that our differences are not what it is keeping us apart but our refusal to acknowledge that we are different.

Freire's pedagogy and feminist theories differ from each in many aspects but if we acknowledge that both offer us a theory of oppression that can help us transform our worlds, we will realize that their commonalities can be of significant help to our communities and ourselves. And that was exactly what my study addressed.

### **Giving Back to My Community: Helping the Advancement of Democracy in Brazil**

This study gave me the opportunity to become a better researcher and educator. When I chose my dissertation topic back in 1999, I knew that I wanted to make a difference in my life and in my country. I knew that my commitment to social change and the reduction of poverty in my country would always be a significant part of my self. Since I was 19 years old, my struggle has evolved

around the construction of a world where people could be express their humanity without fear and lack of basic needs.

I have grown in the past 17 years but my desire and commitment to become a better human being and help others in their search for liberation has not changed. I cannot picture myself in the world without questioning and transforming it. Our struggle is part of our transformation and our transformation is part our struggle. One cannot survive without the other. Living without struggle and transformation is just not part of who I am and who I want to be.

In engaging in the process of struggle and transformation, I found ways to give something back to my community. I understand I cannot change my reality overnight nor will it happen without struggle. However, I believe that the only way we can contribute to the construction of a better world is if we commit ourselves to change what it is inside us. No transformation will occur if we do not acknowledge that we are a significant part of the transformation process. The world does not change *per se*; human beings do in the dialogic process they engage in with each other. Human beings construct and de-construct their realities when they interpret the structures of power present in their contexts.

Believing that change comes from within helps me understand that in the struggle for my liberation, I will have to face my fears and anxieties in order to dream with a better world for all human beings. I believe that I can make a difference in the world, and I know that in changing myself I am contributing to the transformation of the world.

I offer my community my activism. In writing my history with the Brazilian landless women, I learned that the struggle never ends and our hope should never die because a world without hope is a world without feelings and a world without feelings cannot attend to our needs as human beings.

The literacy program we developed at Natureza was just a start into the journey my participants will face against gender oppression in the settlement, the movement, and in the country. The program we developed and implemented at Natureza helped me shape my views about the kind of feminist researcher and educator I want to be. I shaped my definition of what it is like to be a human being and now I strongly believe that my commitment to social transformation in my country is a significant part of my liberation process.

My study gave me the chance to make a difference in my corner of the world. I plan to continue the struggle and help the MST in their process of liberation in Brazil. During my last visit to Natureza settlement Preta invited me to come back and help the MST advance the discussion on gender at a national level as well as work on some educational programs the movement is currently developing.

Preta's invitation made me realize how wonderful it is to develop research studies that enable us to give something back to our communities. I still remember how happy I was when Preta said, "we need your help and would love to see you coming back to the settlement." Her words brought tears to my eyes and I thanked her and said, "I need your help too."

The beauty of a qualitative research study resides in the notion that researcher and researched, in sharing experiences, grow together as human beings. This “growing together” process allows us to move forward in our search for liberation in that we construct and de-construct our world. In this process, my participants opened their hearts and arms and allowed me to enter their worlds and in doing this, they taught me how to be a better human being.

In conclusion, I hope my study contributes to critical pedagogues and feminist scholars to acknowledge that research studies should be meaningful to our community and ourselves. I hope it also contributes to an understanding that in order for us to work towards an authentic form of liberation, gender issues need to be addressed in all contexts. In addition, we should never forget to speak with our hearts because this is the essence of what it is like to be a human being.

I have been speaking with my heart since the day I proposed to develop my study with the MST. In doing this, I was able to make sense of theories I have learned during my doctoral program. The dialogue I engaged in with my participants helped me realize that qualitative research studies can also contribute to the advancement of democracy, and consequently, the reduction of poverty in our communities. Also, the qualitative research study I carried out helped me understand that I would not have been able to finish my dissertation in such a short period of time if my topic had not been significant to me as a feminist researcher, educator, and a citizen. Thus, if I am asked how I managed to write my dissertation in two months, I will quote Freire and reply, “I did it with my heart.”



I did it with my heart because my heart is part of the very same essence that makes me human. And it will always be.

## POSTSCRIPT

Developing this study with the women in the Brazilian landless movement has given me the opportunity to put into practice part of what I have learned during my doctoral program. In addition, it has given me the opportunity to work with social transformation, something I highly value and believe in.

When I left the settlement, my participants told me that they wanted to continue the literacy program. Their goals were to invite more people to participate in it so they could keep advancing the discussion of gender at Natureza. In my conversations with Maria, my informant, over e-mail in the past two months, I learned that Ica is attending school and will finish middle school this semester. Maria said that Ica's decision to go back to school and get a degree "was a fruit of my study at Natureza." When I read Maria's words, my eyes were filled with tears. I am glad I could make a difference in their lives. And I am thankful for having the opportunity to write a piece of my history with them. Maria also told me the program is alive and invited me to visit the settlement as soon I return to Brazil.

Besides my conversations with Maria, I talked to the person in charge of developing the MST website a month ago. She agreed to have the materials we developed at Natureza posted on the movement's homepage. Before leaving Natureza in July, I talked to my participants about posting their materials online and they agreed to it. Ica said it was a form for them "to share their experiences

with other MST settlements in the country. It is a way for us to keep our struggle alive.”

Dear *companheiras*: I am ready to return home and continue our struggle against all kinds of oppression.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **Interview Questions**

I used these questions to help me start the dialogue at Natureza settlement. However, because of the nature of my study and the dialogic approach we engaged in during our conversations other questions aroused, which are not mentioned here. But they were an important part of my study and therefore of my data analysis.

#### **Questions**

##### **Phase One**

- 1) I would like you to tell me about yourself, your age, marital status, schooling, where you came from, and etc. Please feel free to tell me whichever you would like about yourself.
- 2) Could you please talk about your experience participating in the movement? I would like to know how, why, and when you joined the movement.
- 3) How do you see women's participation in the movement? What are their roles inside the movement?
- 4) In what ways does your participation help to strengthen the movement?
- 5) In what ways participating in the movement helps you, as a woman, empower yourself?

- 6) How do you see gender issues being addressed at Natureza settlement?

### **Phase Two**

- 1) What does literacy mean to you?
- 2) How do you see literacy helping you advance women's issues at Natureza?

### **Phase Three**

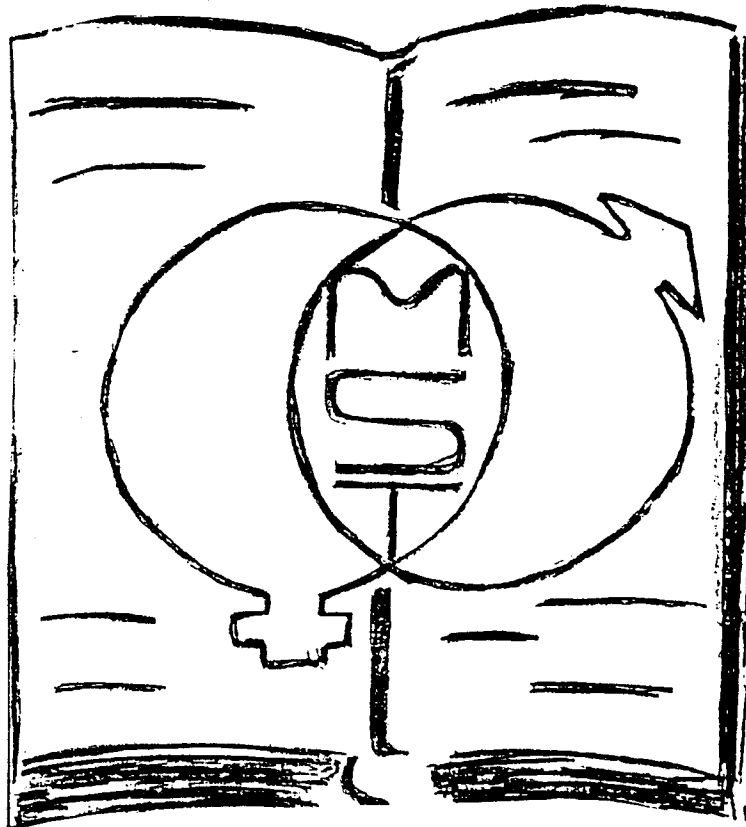
- 1) What kind of literacy program do you think would attend to your needs and to the needs your settlement?
- 2) How do you see yourself taking action towards gender equality at Natureza?

**APPENDIX B**

Portuguese version of the brochure developed by my participants during my study at Natureza settlement. Name of locations and participants omitted for anonymity.

**Brochure****Cover**

Drawing:



Title: Our history of relations: Our relations that make history

Location of settlement (omitted)

## **Inside**

### **Our History**

We are sons and daughters of small farmers who came from the northern region of Rio Grande do Sul. We camped in X and other municipalities between 1982 and 1995 when we occupied Natureza settlement. In our struggle for agrarian reform, we saw the need to become literate and also to discuss gender issues. Therefore, after we engaged in dialogue about gender and literacy in the settlement we decided to form a literacy program at Natureza with the help of the educator Claudia Mendes Giesel. In our first meetings, we learned about each other's histories. We also identified our problems and concerns and our need to improve our literacy skills. During our meetings, we defined some possible themes that could help us advance and strengthen our group.

### **Our Goals**

Our main goal is to become literate and be able to read the world. In addition, we want:

- ❖ To advance gender discussion in the MST and make this discussion part of our daily lives;
- ❖ Understand better the Freirean method;
- ❖ Open a space where men and women can have equal rights and responsibilities.

### **Our Challenges**

Our goal is to discuss gender issues with adults and children in the MST's settlements and camps. We also want to end illiteracy and gender inequality.

We have the challenge to discuss and put into practice a more just and equal society for all of us.

### **Reflections**

- ❖ Meeting to discuss and reflect on gender issues with families at Natureza settlement;
- ❖ Meeting to discuss and reflect on gender issues at Y region.

**Organization** (name of participants omitted for anonymity).



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